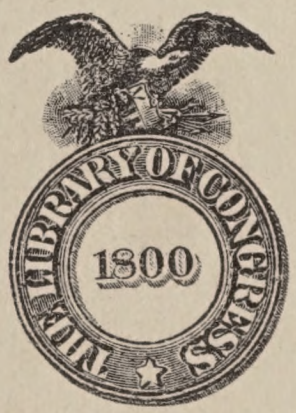
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"THE BLACK SPRANG STRAIGHT UPWARD FIVE FEET IN THE CLEAR."

ST NICHOLAS BOOKS

THE BOYS OF THE RINCON RANCH

BY H · S · CANFIELD

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TO

ANDREW JACKSON MURFF, JR.,
OF SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA,
THIS TALE IS TOLD BY ONE
WHO USED TO BE A BOY

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THE BOYS OF THE RINCON RANCH

CHAPTER I

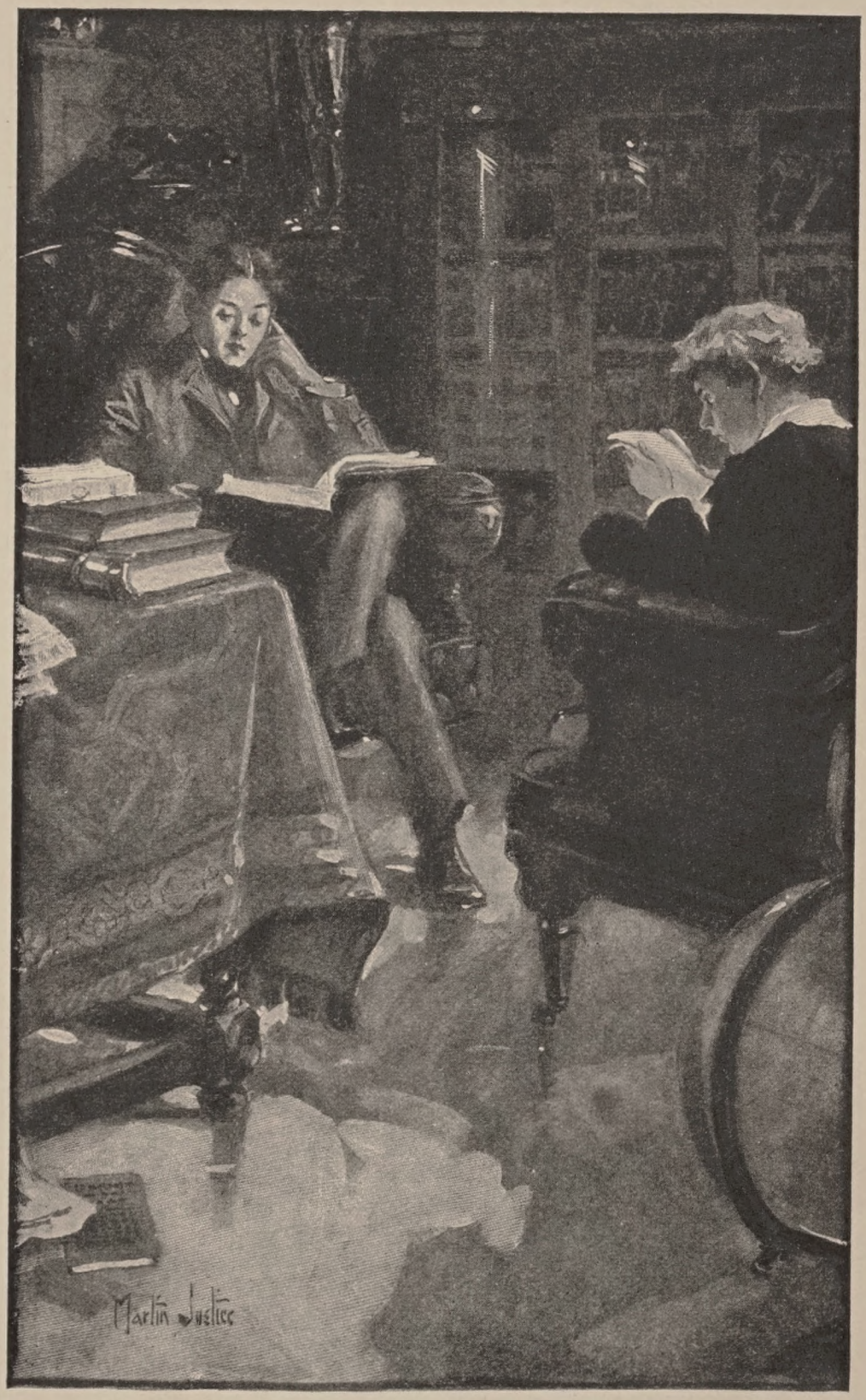
THE DEPARTURE FROM THE CITY

MRS. HENRIETTA LUCY CRUGER, wife of a wealthy and prominent banker of New York City, called to her two sons, Ralph and Donald:

"Boys, come here! I have news for you."

Ralph, sixteen years old, slender, long-legged, pale, and narrow of chest, was doubled in a big chair in the adjacent library, deep in the second volume of Carlyle's "History of the French Revolution." He did not understand one half of

it, nor appreciate the other half, but it was his fashion to pretend a tremendous interest. A boy only fourteen years old, who attended the same fashionable school, had read the book, and talked much about it. So he answered not at all to his mother's call. Donald, aged thirteen, like his brother in build and face, was curled in another chair. His nose was within three inches of a thin volume bought in a second-hand book-store downtown. When not reading it in safety, he kept it hidden in the bosom of his shirt. It was called "Sea Wolf; or, The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main." Only eight persons were killed in the first chapter, but it got better as it went on. Just then the "Avenger" had captured Panama with a boat-load of assistants, defeating two thousand Spanish soldiers, and was cavorting through the main street with a pistol in each hand and a cutlas between his teeth, picking off dukes and captains of the guard. In justice to Donald it must be said that he did not



"CARLYLE'S 'FRENCH REVOLUTION,' AND 'THE BLACK AVENGER OF THE SPANISH MAIN.'"

hear his mother. He would not have heard a salvo of artillery.

She called again:

"Ralph! Donald! Come here!"

There was more positiveness in her voice. She was a woman of firmness, and governed her big boys as well as she could. Necessarily she was shut out from much of their sport, and was compelled to depend upon their assertions for knowledge of how they spent their spare time. This was not doing them any good. Their father, a big, good-natured, busy man, saw them only in the evening hour, and not always then. His theory was that "boys will be boys," and, properly fed and clothed, will come out all right in the end. This was not doing them any good, either. The added sharpness in the tone pierced through the Carlyle mists, and Ralph rose with a sigh of relief, though he would have denied that it was anything of the kind. He walked across the room and yanked his smaller brother from the chair.

"Wake up, kid!" he said. "The mother 's calling. The 'Black Avenger' is a dead one, anyhow. Why 'n't you read 'Treasure Island'? Old John Silver was a daisy."

Donald glanced resentfully at him, but rammed the "Sea Wolf" under the chair-cushion in silence. A moment later they stood before Mrs. Cruger in a small room she had fitted up as her own sitting-room, so that she might be near to her husband in the evening. A pleasant, grave-faced lady, with a decided chin and gentle brown eyes. She smiled at the boys, and beckoned them to her. They went promptly enough, for, albeit spoiled somewhat, they loved their mother very truly. She put an arm about each, and said:

"You 've heard me speak often of your aunt Mary Downing, boys?"

Ralph nodded in silence. Donald said:

"She lives in Texas near the Rio Grande. The Rio Grande rises in south-

western Colorado and flows in a generally southerly direction through New Mexico, emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. It forms much of the boundary line between the republics of Mexico and the United States of America. It—"

Ralph said: "Oh, shut up!"

Mrs. Cruger smiled, and continued:

"You know, then, that Dr. John Downing, your uncle by marriage, who was a Philadelphia physician in excellent practice, went to the Lower Rio Grande country in 1880, taking with him my sister Mary (his wife), their son Harry, then six years old, and all of his capital. He did this because of bad health resulting from overwork. He wanted pure air, quiet, and a complete change of occupation. He bought twenty thousand acres of wild land in Dimmit County, built a home, and began raising cattle and sheep. He died five years ago. The venture proved to be a success, I think. Your aunt manages the ranch, assisted by Harry, of

whom she is very proud. He is just your age, Ralph."

"Her letters are full of him," said Ralph.

"Very true. Well, she has written to me, and asks that I send you two to spend a winter on the ranch. It is now the end of September, and the most delightful season of the year is beginning in that section. She is anxious to have you come. Would you like to go?"

Ralph did not answer. He was thinking of half-formed plans for the coming winter — theaters, lectures, dances for youngsters in their teens, automobile rides in the snow, ice-polo, of many things. He coughed slightly behind his hand, and his mother marked the cough. A shade of anxiety came to her face. Donald asked:

"Are there Spanish down there?"

"There are many Spanish-descended Mexicans," Mrs. Cruger replied.

"'Don Antonio Palacios de Garcia,

governor of Panama, a grandee of haughty mien,' " Donald went on incautiously, "' defended the town with all the skill and valor of a tried veteran, but his stern bravery availed naught against the magnificent daring of the black-browed —' "

Then he stopped in confusion, the blood mounting to his pale face. His mother looked at him wonderingly. Ralph snickered. She forbore to press an inquiry, however, because the business in hand was important.

"You ought to go," she remarked musingly, speaking half to herself. "I really think that you ought to go. You are neither of you so strong as I could wish — though you are stout boys," she added quickly, to reassure herself; "yes, you are quite stout. Still, the climate and the open air would make you stronger, and I—I think that I shall send you."

There was much pain in her brown eyes, and her arm tightened about Donald, but, boylike, they did not see the pain, nor had

they any understanding of what the decision cost her.

They began a protest, but she interrupted them with:

"There, there! I have talked over the matter with your father. He agrees with me. It is best."

These were bright boys, with naturally keen wits sharpened by education and city life, and they said no more. They had come to know that "It is best" from their mother's lips meant the argument was closed. She told them that they would start in a week, and that she would attend to purchasing proper outfits. They returned to the library, but, to save his life, Ralph could not become interested in the bloodthirstiness of M. Marat, and for Donald the fangs of the "Sea Wolf" had lost their point and shine. Gore dripped from the jaws of this ravager, and the howls of his fearful companions rang over burning Panama, but it was all flat and stale.

The intervening days passed quickly.

There were some tears and sobbings from Donald, but the parents were inexorable. More than once Ralph felt a lump in his throat, but he choked it back. Should a youth able to grapple with Carlyle boohoo like an infant?

The boys surveyed their rough clothing with a mixture of interest and contempt. They were pleased, however, with a small rifle and a shot-gun, and with a handsome camera, too. Two huge trunks accompanied them to the train. When their mother had seen them comfortably placed on a sleeper which would go through to St. Louis, she kissed them often, and told them that they must write to her every few days, which they promised promptly, having no foreknowledge that they would do nothing of the kind.

They reached the Mississippi on schedule time, raced across the State of Missouri, cut a corner off Kansas, and plunged downward through the wilder-

ness of Indian Territory. They were interested, of course, in the copper-colored people with black eyes who came to the little stations in the Territory to see the train go by, and for the first time encountered slain wild turkeys as an article of daily barter. When they entered Texas they began to inquire of fellow-passengers the distance to San Antonio. They were astounded when told that it was some hundreds of miles. Also they were disappointed, because they were getting tired. A boy, however, will stand an unlimited amount of riding so long as he has new things to look at, and they were fairly fresh when they reached the quaint half-Mexican city of the Alamo, where they stayed three hours, and Donald made himself ill with tamales and *chile-con-carne*, which burnt the roof of his mouth dreadfully, and made him wish that he was back with his mother.

Their destination was Cotulla, a little railway town in La Salle County, eighty

miles south of San Antonio. They arrived at five o'clock in the afternoon of a cloudless October day. As they stepped upon the wooden platform of the station and saw their trunks tossed from the baggage-car, they were surprised by the lightness and dryness of the atmosphere, in which there was not even a suggestion of cold. It seemed to both Ralph and Donald that their chests expanded an extra inch as this air found its way into their lungs. It had an exciting effect, too, and sent the blood faster through their veins. Green things were all about them. Even the grass had the hue which adorns Central Park in the spring. They knew that they ought to feel lonely, but they did not. Instead they were happy, and smiled at each other, though they had quarreled now and then on the way down. They had sent frequent postal-cards homeward, and thought that their duties as correspondents had been discharged.

They were gazing at the fast-vanishing

train when a round, pleasant voice, with a boyish ring to it, greeted them:

"You are my cousins, are n't you? I 'm Harry Downing."

They turned, and faced a youth taller than Ralph and much heavier. His shoulders were square, his arms long, his chest deep and arched — evidently a powerful boy for his years. There was something in his frank face which reminded them of their mother. Perhaps it was the eyes, which were brown like hers, or it may have been the resolute chin. The almost womanish softness of the eyes was redeemed in part by heavy black eyebrows. His hair, too, was black, and curled massively over his brow. The wind lifting these short curls showed a white space upon the upper part of his forehead to which the sun had not reached. The remainder of his face was burnt to a nut-brown, and through the darkened skin the clear flush of health glowed redly. There was an air of independence and self-reli-

ance about him, of positiveness even, and no trace at all of embarrassment. He was clad in a light woolen coat of brown, a gray flannel shirt, and brown trousers stuffed into riding-boots whose heels were spurred. On his head, tilted aback, was a wide dark hat of felt,— a sombrero,— and about his waist a broad leather belt with loops upon it, made for the holding of rifle and pistol cartridges. He smiled as he spoke, showing white, even teeth. It was inexpressibly debonair and engaging, this smile.

Ralph, as became the owner of an automobile and a student of Carlyle, was slightly formal. He had dim thoughts of reaching into a vest-pocket for a card. The eyes of brown, so like mother's, caught Donald, and he stepped forward impulsively, both hands extended.

"Yes," he said, "we 're the Cruger boys. You 're Cousin Harry. How do you do!"

Harry shook hands vigorously, clapped

the reluctant Ralph on the shoulder, and said, with a slight drawl:

"Well, now, I 'm mighty glad to see you, and madre will be glad, too."

"Who 's that?" asked Ralph.

"Madre," Harry answered in a surprised tone. "My mother, you know."

"Oh," said Ralph, "I tumble. That 's Spanish." Before Donald's eyes floated a vision of the "Black Avenger" careering through Panama. He liked this cousin, and was beginning to like this country. "We will stop here to-night?" his brother asked.

"Oh, no," was the reply. "The sun 's an hour high yet. The wagon and team are here. We 'll make Espia Creek by dark, and camp there."

Two Mexicans were called, and the trunks lifted into a stout farm-wagon drawn by under-sized horses. The Crugers climbed into a spare seat. Harry took the reins, and, by way of a level road, they entered a dense growth of

mesquit which grew to the edge of the town. On either side strange birds were calling. The rich scent of late-blossoming catclaw made the air odorous. Yellow blooms of the *huisache* hung over the narrow road. A bevy of slate-colored quails whirred up in mimic thunder from the undergrowth. Huge cacti, ten, twenty feet high, reared ungainly forms. The land was rolling, gentle hills and shallow vales, and swathed completely in its robe of green. Two miles from Cotulla they struck a small prairie, still starred with blossoms. Trotting slowly for a half-hour, they paused upon the summit of a low hill. Below them stretched a declivity of easy grade. At its bottom, a quarter of a mile away, was a line of cottonwood, oak, hickory, and pecan trees.

"That," said Harry, pointing, "is Espia Creek."

The sun poised for an instant upon the western horizon, sending long red shafts across the close-packed tops of the mes-

quit, and dived as a swimmer to his plunge. Then the dark fell. Not five minutes of twilight intervened. This brought to the brothers a sense of strangeness.

On the banks of a clear stream, camp was pitched. Preparations were simple. Harry unhitched the horses, and staked them out with long ropes, so that they might graze through the night. He built a fire of the loose wood lying about, threw three pairs of blankets on the dry ground, went to the creek and returned with a bucket of water, set a pot of coffee to boil on the coals, from the rear of the wagon extracted tin plates, cups, and knives and forks, sliced some bread, and peeped into the pot. Then he unrolled a clean white cloth, and displayed the plump bodies of six quails that he had killed on his way into town. They were deftly broiled on the coals, and the Crugers were invited to fall to. The coffee was good, the home-made bread was excellent,

"ON THE BANKS OF A CLEAR STREAM, CAMP WAS PITCHED."

the quails were delicious. Everything was sauced with hunger.

Wrapped in their blankets, the boys watched for a little while the hosts of brilliant stars studding a sky of blue-black. Then they slept more soundly than they had ever slept amid the muffled roar of city streets.

CHAPTER II

AN EARLY MORNING BATTLE IN THE CHAPARRAL

IT was fifty miles from the railway to the ranch, over a road that was often not more than half a road; but the horses, of mixed mustang and American blood, grass-fed, enduring and lusty, made nothing of it. They seemed as strong at the end of the trip as at its beginning. Halting upon an eminence, late on the afternoon of the second day, Harry directed the boys' attention to a house of snowy whiteness, which nestled in a grove of live-oaks some five miles distant, although it seemed not more than two. It made a pretty picture, contrasting its whiteness

with the deep green of the trees surrounding it.

"There," he said, with both love and pride, "is home."

"Has the place a name?" asked Ralph.

"It is called Rincon Ranch, and our brand is the 'Circle R' — a capital R, you know, with a ring around it."

During the drive the brothers had learned not only to like their cousin, but to regard him with a certain respect. He seemed such a capable fellow, and, though to the full as boyish as they, had much self-poise. His views of life were larger. He seemed already to have assumed responsibilities which are part of man's estate. He talked gravely about the prices of cattle; the amount of wool a well-graded sheep should yield; the condition of the Boston market; the comparative merits of Holstein, Hereford, Devonshire, and polled Angus breeds; the necessity at once of wise economy and of large liberality in conducting a business

of importance. They were disposed to look upon him as one much older than they until he displayed an almost childish curiosity about their city lives, the cut of their clothing, their sports, ambitions, and the notions that come to every boy. He was also eager to inspect their weapons, and manifested the liveliest interest in the camera, the only one he had ever seen. When told that even Donald, at thirteen, was able to make a fairly satisfactory photograph of persons or things, he was immersed in thought for a while, and then said resignedly: "That comes from living where you have advantages." Master Ralph took occasion soon to state, in an offhand manner, that Thomas Carlyle was a great writer, and his "History of the French Revolution" an enthralling work, whereupon their positions were reversed, and Harry surveyed him as one far above ordinary planes.

On this ride the young rancher showed not only that he was a good driver, but that he had eyes for everything above

them or beneath them or on each side of them. Plainly the life of the prairie and chaparral was an open page to him. He told them the name of each strange plant and flower. They added the titles of dozens of birds to their vocabularies. A long-legged mixture of flier and fowl appearing suddenly upon one side of the roadway, and darting along it with tremendous speed, the Crugers asked simultaneously for its name.

"That," he said, "is a paisano, which is Spanish for peasant. 'El paisano' the Mexicans call that fellow. Americans know him also as a 'road-runner' or 'chaparral-cock.' He is swifter than a quail on foot, but not so fast as a wild turkey."

"Are they good to eat?" was the next natural inquiry.

"They are not good for anything," Harry answered, "except to kill snakes. They are high-born chieftains at that work."

He also introduced his cousins to a dozen

differing varieties of hawks, from the small sparrow-hawk with blue in its wings, to a huge black prowler almost as large as an eagle and quite as savage. It often bore off young lambs, he told them. Reaching under the wagon-seat, he drew out a Winchester carbine, dropped the reins, threw it to his shoulder, and, with no apparent aim, fired. The great bird was more than a hundred yards high, and the usual strong wind of western Texas was blowing, but a single large feather, almost ebon in color, was ripped from a wing and floated downward to the road. Not waiting for the team to check, Donald sprang out and rolled in the sand. He was up in a moment, however, and stuck the feather in his hat, clambering into the wagon, dusty and flushed, but happy.

Ralph looked on a little enviously. He began to think that being a learned and superior person had its disadvantages.

"Did you expect to kill that hawk?" he asked incredulously of Harry, who

had made no apology for the miss, but continued serenely driving.

"Why, sure!" was the response. "I 've done it often; but I often miss easier shots."

The boys were specially attracted by the numerous forms of cacti, because in the conservatory at home they had been taught to regard these plants as costly and curious. Harry estimated them only as part of the general landscape, and of little use or beauty, saving only the broad-leafed prickly-pear, which, he said, contained much moisture, and was fed to the cattle in time of drought, the sharp thorns being first burned off in an open fire. He showed them the red pear-apples, half as large as an orange and elliptical in form, which grow on the ends of these leaves, and told them that when first eaten they were apt to cause fever, but once the fever had passed the person eating them wanted more. He showed them, too, the finger cactus, standing straight and slender, not

larger round than a fair-sized walking-stick; the snake cactus, which ran along the ground like a vine; the rock cactus, growing in limestone crevices; the Spanish dagger, most cruel of plants; the petalla cactus, bearing a small round fruit in its center of a deliciousness past words; and the "niggerhead" cactus, round, woolly, and clumplike. Massed in with these were ratama, huisache, wild sage, catclaw, mimosa, and pepper, making in many places a thicket impenetrable to anything larger than a rat. Every vegetable thing, except the pepper, bore thorns. Harry said:

"The thorns are put upon all these things by nature, or, as madre says, by Providence. But for the thorns the plants would long ago have been destroyed by wild animals for the moisture they hold. Wetness is worth money in this climate. The pepper-bushes don't have thorns, because they don't need them. They are hotter than fire. I get that — and a good

deal else — from madre. She says the thorns are God's armor for the green things."

They found the ranch-house to be a low, rambling structure built of adobe, or slabs of sun-dried earth, each slab two feet long, a foot wide, and a foot thick. It was whitewashed heavily upon the outside, and its roof was made of a water-plant called tule. This roof was eighteen inches thick and impervious to rain. The house covered a quarter of an acre, exclusive of the long veranda, or "gallery," which, roofed also with tule, ran all the way around it. Standing in the door, shading her eyes with her hand from the bright sunlight which poured over the wide land, was a woman of middle age, her dark hair streaked with gray here and there; but her face was unwrinkled, and it showed ruddily under the bronze, as did her son's. The face was beaming now, and as she started rapidly toward them when they came to a halt, the visitors could almost

have thought that their own mother was coming to meet them. She did not pause to greet them in words, but took each of them into her arms and kissed them tenderly. Then she said:

"My dear boys! My dear boys!"

Harry stood by, smiling. As she turned to him, he put his arm about her with a swift little squeeze. The Crugers marked, during their stay, that their cousin's attitude toward her was always one of love and deference, almost of reverence, yet had in it a half-playful protecting quality, as if she were at once mother and sister. Mrs. Downing, like their own mother, was not tall, but was active and gentle, with much the same hair and eyes. Something her son had whispered to her pleased her evidently, for she put a hand upon the shoulder of each of the brothers and marched them toward the house, looking first into one face and then into the other, and saying:

"You are like your father, and yet like

Lucy, too. Our winds will put color into your cheeks. You will be happy here. Oh, I know you will be happy here!"

Two Mexicans, dark-faced, heavily built, and walking with the wide, straddling gait of the cow-hand, came from behind the house, lifted the trunks from the wagon, and followed them. Two more Mexicans unhitched the horses and led them to a near-by pasture fenced in with barbed wire. Two more took hold of the wagon-tongue and ran the vehicle into an outhouse. Four more, appearing apparently from nowhere, looked on appreciatively, their white teeth showing under black mustachios. A fat Mexican woman of forty and three plump Mexican girls laughed softly as they entered, and, coming forward, bowed respectfully. These were the cook and her handmaidens. Behind them a shock-headed Mexican boy of ten years stared with round eyes of jet, and neither smiled nor spoke. When Harry came in, however, directing

the men with the trunks, he grinned stolidly and retired into the darkness of the kitchen.

The boys were taken to a large room whose walls also were whitewashed and spotless. It contained two narrow cots of rawhide, three chairs with rawhide bottoms, a plain square center-table upon which were books and a lamp, two chests of drawers, a half-length mirror of fine beveled glass, two small wash-stands holding each a tin pitcher and basin, soap and rough towels, combs and brushes; and on the floor, which was uncarpeted, were two hammocks, ready for slinging. At the far end of the room was a huge open fireplace, half filled with gnarled mesquit logs. By each cot was a strip of matting. Few but good pictures were on the walls. Two narrow windows, whose casings swung in solidly on hinges, looked out upon a side yard only four feet below them. The books were of history and travel. Peeping slyly at their

titles, Donald was inclined to rank them as lacking in dash.

Dark having fallen soon, the boys were fed with brown bread, fresh goat's milk, and curd with red pepper in it. This last was hot but good. Then, noting the lines of fatigue under their eyes, their aunt insisted that they go to bed, reserving her questions for the morrow. They found the rawhide cots smooth and springy, though a little hard, and they were twelve hours in dreamland.

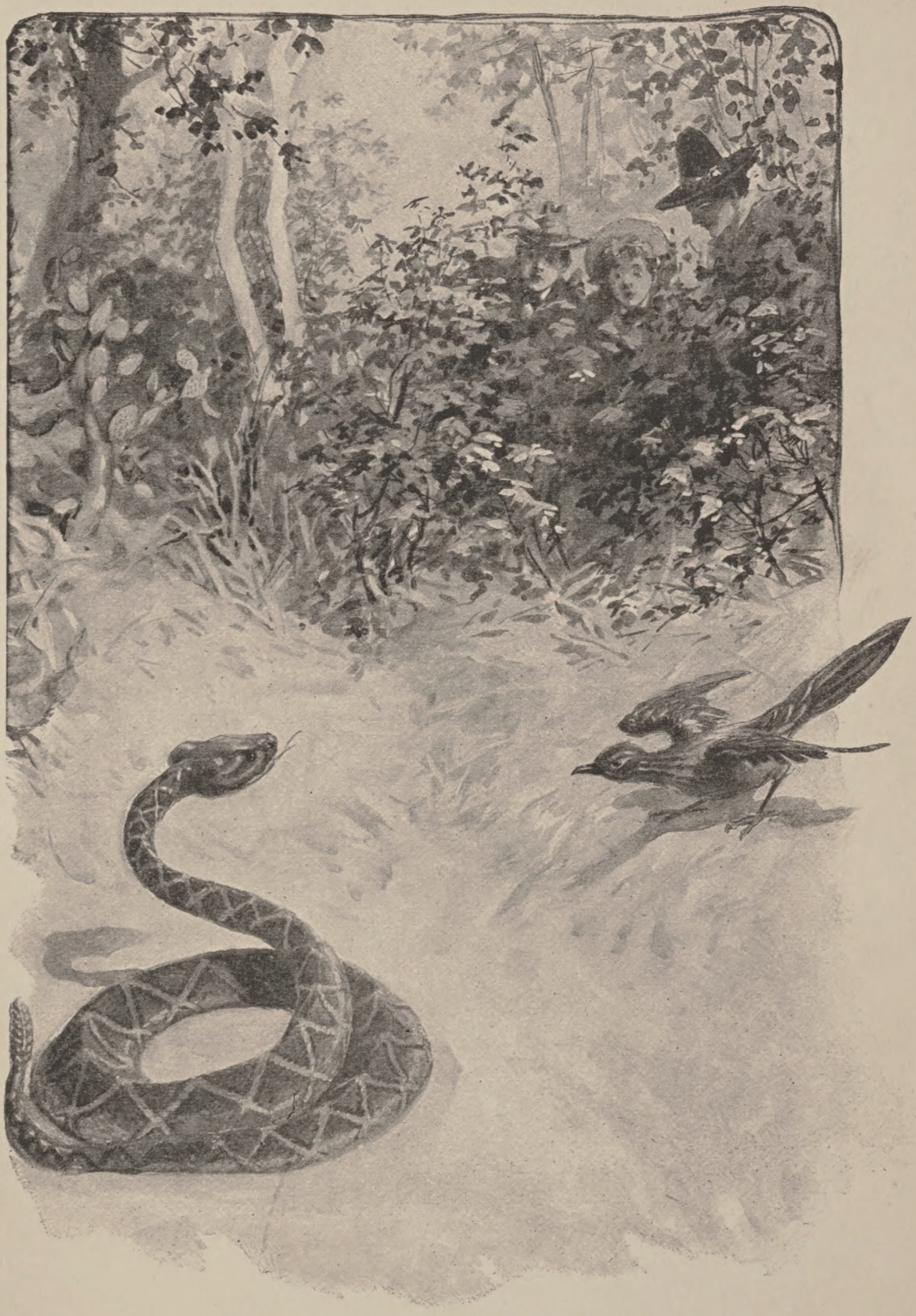
They were awakened at daylight by a cheerful hammering on the door and a strong voice calling. Then Harry entered, booted as usual. It was not the New York hour for rising, and Ralph showed a disposition to remain in bed; but Donald hurled a pillow across the room, making an excellent shot, and he got up sourly. The breakfast was of eggs, mutton-chops, biscuit, and one cup each of strong coffee, the berry having been grown in Mexico. Then Harry

showed them his room, which was furnished like their own, except that it had but one cot and held more books. Also it contained a handsome saddle and bridle, two rifles, a shot-gun, and a Colt's revolver. In the general sitting-room was a large glass case containing beautifully mounted specimens of more than a hundred birds, and another with specimens of the smaller animals of that region. They were the work of young Downing, who was a taxidermist by natural gift.

Early morning and much of the forenoon were consumed in inspecting the outhouses, the quarters of the Mexican hands, of whom there were a dozen, and the various sheep, goat, and cattle pens, as well as in talking to their aunt, who had many questions to ask. Toward noon Harry said:

"Now I 'll show you our bathing-place, which I use all the year round."

He led them two hundred yards to the rear of the house, where, through a grassy



THE BATTLE IN THE CHAPARRAL.

vale, ran the plashing waters of Pendencia Creek, twenty feet across and ten feet deep in the middle. Here the banks were nearly circular, forming a pool, and over it curved the huge trunk of an oak, which, as their young host said, made an excellent thing to "dive from, or fall from." Boards were laid along the edge of the pool to insure clean feet on coming out, and its lower border was fringed by wondrous lilies. The boys saw fish darting below. They wandered down the bank a little way to where the undergrowth was thicker.

Suddenly Harry, who was leading, stopped and motioned them to be still. A peculiar harsh staccato call came from some bird in their front, followed by another and another. This was accompanied by a steady sharp humming, which reminded Ralph of the noise made by a typewriter when the carriage is dragged over the teeth in its rear. Peering cautiously through a

fringe of catclaw, they saw a small open glade not ten yards across, and in its center a huge mottled rattlesnake was coiled, ring upon ring, its wicked dark head raised six inches and waving slowly to and fro. Its small eyes gleamed like carbuncles, and its tail vibrated so rapidly that the tip could not be seen. It was in an extremity of anger. Five feet away, its head lowered nearly to the grass, its bill extended, its wings half raised and sharply elbowed, a chaparral-cock hopped slowly up and down. A battle to the death was on, and the boys watched it strainingly, Harry with never-failing interest, the brothers almost in terror. They had never before seen the dreaded rattler.

Like a flash of light, the snake launched itself forward, and its head struck the sward a good seven feet from the spot where it had been coiled; but with equal rapidity the cock had leaped a yard aside. No human eye could follow this stroke

or its avoidance. One instant the reptile was bunched, and the bird nearly stationary. In half the next instant the reptile was at full length and the bird out of danger.

It is the weakness of the rattler that it must coil before it can resume the attack. It endeavored immediately to re-coil, but was not fast enough. With a lightning-like spring, the paisano alighted squarely upon its neck, two inches below its head. The sharp bill descended twice. Then it hopped two yards away and uttered a squawk of triumph. The rattler threw itself into a spiral and struck blindly its full length. This it did twenty times, coiling and springing with inconceivable rapidity. Both eyes were destroyed. Its thuds were audible yards away. Always it hissed venomously. The increasing slowness of its motions showed coming exhaustion. Then, after a spring, it lay stretched for a second or two. In that time the chaparral-cock, which had not

ceased to dance about and call loudly, fastened once more upon its neck, and drove its bill into the brain. There was a quiver of the long body—no more.

"That was worth looking at, eh?" asked Harry, stepping into the glade and turning over the snake with his foot. The paisano instantly vanished.

"It was," answered Ralph, who was deadly pale and breathing in gasps. "I—I must write about it to our school society."

Donald, less impressionable, shifted from one foot to the other, inspected the dead snake carefully from head to tail, looked hard at the bushes in which the chaparral-cock had disappeared, and delivered himself gravely of the highest praise of which he was capable.

"That bird," he said, "is the champion featherweight of the West. He is n't a thing but a wonder."

Harry inquired with polite interest:

"What is a champion featherweight?"

There are strange ignorances when a boy, or man for that matter, lives many miles from a post-office and therefore sees no daily paper.

CHAPTER III

A CATTLE ROUND-UP ON THE PRAIRIE

TWO weeks later there was a marked change in the Cruger brothers. They seemed bigger. Certainly they were blacker and stronger. They wore their roughest clothing. They were booted and wide-hatted. At the heels of each jingled large spurs. About Donald's waist was a belt like Harry's, with plenty of cartridge-loops, though he had no revolver. It looked sanguinary, particularly when he filled it with emptied shells picked up from the range Harry had built for rifle practice. Ralph had gone a step further. He not only wore a belt, but under it a crimson sash, as was the custom of the Mexicans. They called it a *banda*, and

after the first day he called it a banda. "Sash" sounded effete. The boys lost no time in acquiring the commoner phrases of the Mexican dialect: *buenos dias* (good day, good morning, howdy), *buenas noches* (good night), *poco, poco* (go slow), *poco tiempo* (in a little while, directly), *bastante* (enough, plenty, don't give me any more), *mañana* (no hurry about it; better put off until to-morrow what you can do to-day), *adios* (good-by), *muchas gracias* (many thanks), and so forth. The day they were able to say, "*No le vist' un caballo colorado?*" ("Have n't you seen a bay horse?") they could scarcely eat. What did Carlyle amount to, anyhow? What would the "Black Avenger" have said if he could have seen that belt with the gleaming cartridge-cases in it? They carried themselves with a freer air. They assumed a hardy, roving manner, like Micawber when he determined to emigrate. Though not muscular, they were fairly expert in boy athletics, and learned to

ride with ease. Ralph's pony was a sorrel with four white feet and a blaze on its nose; Donald's a bright bay with black points. Both of the horses were smoothly gaited and swift. The saddles were heavy Texas affairs and double-girthed—"cinched" Harry termed it. The pommels and cantles were high; sitting on these saddles was like sitting on chairs, more particularly as the stirrups of wood were five inches broad and covered nearly all of the bottom of the foot. They found this to be necessary, as in charging through the brush the thorns would otherwise have ripped the soles from their boots. They were specially interested in the bridle-bits, which were new to them — heavy, stiff, and of steel, with long down-dropping shanks to which the reins were attached, and steel curb passing under the animal's chin. A strong man could have broken a horse's jaw with one of them. They wore, when riding, leather overalls without seats, which reached from the instep

nearly to the hips, and were fastened by straps to the waist-belts. These, too, were protections against thorns. Harry said they were "chaparejos." They "rode the range" in the morning, seeing many strange and interesting things. Of afternoons they practised with the rifles, or shot quails or turkeys, or swam in the pool.

At this stage their education with the rope began. Long, light riatas were given to them, and they commenced with endeavoring to throw the loops over the heads of the chickens and ducks about the place, to the unspeakable disgust of Jocosa, the fat cook, and her maidens.

From fowls they advanced to sheep in the pen, and from sheep to goats, which were more active. It was here that, "burning with high hope," Ralph essayed to lasso a billy of venerable beard and evil temper. He beat the goat to and over the corral fence by a head, and picked himself up with his mouth full of dust. The

change the life had made in him was strongly marked by the fact that he did not sulk nor resent the uncontrolled laughter of his companions. Instead, he tried to smile, walked firmly back into the pen, obtained his lariat, and came out with dignity, the goat paying him no attention. He was recompensed when Donald said: "That was game, Ralph," and Harry added very heartily: "You 're all right."

Three meals a day were served at the ranch, but the boys found they did not come often enough. They ate voraciously of beef with pepper, mutton with pepper, kid's flesh with pepper, venison with pepper, turkeys and quails with pepper. They drank quarts of goat's milk. They reveled in fresh eggs, butter, and buttermilk. They had *costillas*, which are sheep's ribs roasted slowly on a stick before an open fire; they had *huevas con savollas*, which are eggs with onions and garlic; they had *tortillas*, thin unsugared cakes made from corn soaked soft in ash

lye and baked between hot stones; they had *enchiladas*, which are grated cheese and chopped onions on tortillas, with spoonfuls of red-hot chile-con-carne gravy poured over the whole; they had little round home-made cheeses, dried in the sun; they had rich sweet-cakes, baked by Jocosa, covered with pink icing and whole pecans stuck into the icing. These things were not enough. As became his superior age, Ralph held himself in, but Donald developed an unbounded taste for *peloncillo*, coarse, moist brown sugar, which is made in Mexico, and comes in round dark sticks as thick as a small boy's arm. He had always a chunk of this stuff in one or another of his pockets, where it melted. When his fingers dived into this pocket in search of knife or string, they came out dripping. He got it from the Mexicans, and, in return for it, took photographs of them all, their wives, and their rolling, half-clothed babies. The three obtained a " dark room " by entering

a deserted one-roomed adobe cabin which had no window, and closing the heavy door behind them. Donald made a picture of Juan, the shock-headed boy who had grinned at Harry upon their arrival. Juan did not utter a hundred words in a week, but he had the virtue of being an admirable listener to any sort of chatter. It is probable that he did not understand a tenth of what was said to him, but this fact never showed on his blank wall of face. The two became companions,—the older boys making also a pair,—and it was funny to see them trotting about, Juan always silent and two paces to the rear, Donald always talking. He had an idea that, with a crew of forty just like Juan, it would be a good thing to attack and sack the city of Cartagena, liberating imprisoned countrymen, and slaying the commandant with his own hand after a fierce combat.

One morning about the middle of the month, Mrs. Downing sent for the two boys and said to them:

"Boys, to-day you will see a round-up. We are shipping a thousand head of cattle to Chicago. You will find it an interesting sight. You must start as soon as you have your breakfast. Harry, be certain that they do not run into danger."

Harry said, "Yes, madre," gravely and respectfully. The horses were saddled as soon as they rose from table, and the boys, clad in full range toggery, felt, as they rode from the corral, that now indeed they were getting to be genuine cowhands. At the pommel of each was a coiled lasso, and they sat securely, even though they lacked the swaying, easy seat of their companion, who rode, as the vaquero always rides, from the knee up, close to the saddle, practically a part of the animal. He told them that the Mexicans were already in the field under command of their overseer, and that the place of round-up was only five miles away.

They covered this distance at a canter, the sorrel, bay, and gray going hard against the bits. Swinging along, the

fresh cool wind singing in their ears, they burst suddenly from the undergrowth into a level prairie two miles long by a mile wide. It was thickly dotted with cattle of all ages. Some were at full speed and bellowing, others walked sedately, but all were converging toward a common point at the center of the plain. Behind them, with wild, long-drawn cries, came the brown vaqueros, swinging loops of lariats. They tilted head downward, and snatched tufts of grass from beneath the feet of their steeds; they stood in the saddles; they rode with their faces to the rear; they crossed both legs in front of the pommels; they lay at full length upon their backs; they dropped the reins and rushed their horses, guiding them by knee-pressure. Five thousand beeves were on the plain, and as they grew more closely packed, a steady sound of trampling came from them, dust-clouds rose, and there was an incessant hoarse bellowing.

Finally, when the mass became practically solid, and was revolving slowly with lowered heads, Harry dismounted and changed his saddle to an undersized "cow-pony," deeming his American-bred gray too valuable for the work. He instructed the brothers to remain at one side, a quarter of a mile away. The lowing of the beasts had frightened them somewhat, and they obeyed willingly. Assuming charge of the men, Harry ordered them to "cut out" a thousand head of cattle three and four years old. The next instant the entire force plunged into the mass. For a few minutes the boys could see nothing except, through the vortex of dust, the shifting forms of cattle, and men on horses. Gradually the air cleared, and one of the men appeared, driving in front of him a dozen beeves of the desired ages. He took them to a point a half-mile away. He was followed by each of the others, all driving bunches of like size. Gradually the mass grew. A cow bolted

from the main herd and tried to join her separated brethren. She was chased back, the ponies sticking closely at her heels without guidance from their riders. Now and then one of the segregated beeves bolted and was pursued swiftly, with the never-changing result that it was forced back into its place. Always came cries from the men: "Hoya! Hoya! Hoya!"

Nearly a thousand head had been bunched, when out of the ruck came Harry, flying behind a powerful two-year-old bent upon mixing with the wrong herd. The pair had covered a hundred yards, and the pony was forging alongside, when it stepped into a rat-hole, and went head over heels. The boy's body described a complete somersault. He landed squarely upon his feet, ran forward a few steps, stopped, and turned to the horse, which lay with its leg strained. To strip the saddle and bridle and call for a fresh mount was the work of a minute. Meanwhile one of the Mexicans had

headed the steer, and another, with a peculiar expression of face, led forward a large black horse which at once riveted the attention of the Crugers, who had ridden hastily to the scene of accident.

Its mane fell half-way to its knees; its tail swept within six inches of the ground; its dark eyes were almost hidden by a tossing forelock; its sides shone like ebony. Round-bodied, deep-chested, small-limbed, iron-hoofed, with lean head, arched ribs and powerful haunches, it stood, a thing of untainted mustang blood, heir of the vast herds that once roamed the Southwestern plains:

> Wild as the wild deer and untaught,
> With spur and bridle undefiled.

"It is the only spare horse, Señor Downing," said the man. "It reached the rancheria but yesterday. It comes from the foot-hills of the Santa Rosas in Mexico. It shows the saddle-marks, but perhaps the señor would not like to ride

it. He can have my horse, and I, José, will mount."

Harry felt the eyes of his cousins on him, and several of the employees had gathered near. His resolute chin set.

"No," he said; "I will ride him. Put on the saddle."

The horse stood quietly, which was a bad sign. So acts the confirmed bucker. He even unclosed his teeth to receive the bit. As the two girths were cinched he drew together slightly, but remained quiescent. Only his rolling dark eyes, each of them showing a half-inch of white, betrayed his temper. Gathering the reins in his left hand and pulling the slender head toward him, to block a possible kick, Harry placed his right hand on the pommel and deftly inserted his foot in the heavy stirrup. The horse was stock-still. Next instant the boy was in the saddle, his strong knees gripping, his left hand low, his chin slightly raised, his right arm hanging loosely by his side, his brown

face pale but smiling. To his right wrist hung by a thong a heavy short whip.

Throwing his head between his knees and drawing his haunches under him, so that the rider seemed set upon a pinnacle, the black sprang straight upward five feet in the clear, half whirled, and came down with his four legs wide apart and as stiff as iron bars. The jar of him shook the ground. Again he rose, and again and again, and each time he struck the earth with all the force of his great weight. Still the youth was immovable. Then, with a hoarse bellow of rage, the mustang sprang straight forward in bound after bound, whirled in swift circles, leaped once more, landing hard, then reared straight up on his hind hoofs, swayed for a moment, and fell backward with a crash. Harry had slipped both feet from the stirrups as the horse hung poised, and, as it started in the fall, leaped lightly clear. By the time the black had rolled over and staggered to his feet, the rider was once

again in the saddle. He sent both spurs home, and the heavy whip began to rise and fall. Then ensued a struggle that was Homeric. The incessant bellowings of the horse, the thud of his flinty hoofs, the inconceivably rapid rise and fall, the height of the leaps, the rush of his descents, his widely tossing mane, the crimson foam upon his lips, where the savage bit had gnawed, and, over all, the pale face and swaying figure of the boy, made up a memory which will stay with the Crugers for many a year. From the assembled vaqueros rose deep shouts of "Bravo! Muy bravo!" Ralph felt sick. Donald was screaming he knew not what phrases of encouragement. Down Harry's smooth chin a scarlet stream was running, jarred from his nostrils by the fearful impacts; but still the spurs were clenched and still the muscular right arm rose and fell. With one last discordant bellow, with one last giant spring, the black stood still as if planted, trembling in every limb,

sweat pouring from his scarred sides, conquered. In an instant two of the Mexicans were at his bit, and the rider climbed stiffly down. He drew a long breath, and wiped the blood from his chin.

"He 's a good horse," he said briefly, "but a child could ride him now. Get me your pony, José. You men will camp here to-night and hold the cattle. We start for the railway in the morning."

He was reticent during the ride home, but said that he felt no ill effects. He was much more impressed by what "madre" would think than by the fact that he had faced and narrowly escaped death.

CHAPTER IV

A CASE OF THE BITER BITTEN

NEXT day the boys saw the cattle started to the railway station, the drivers commanded by the majordomo. Harry concerned himself no more about them, saying that the head man would attend to the shipment and bring back the bills of lading in proper form. Returning to the ranch, the little party made a detour of five miles to the base of low hills to the southward, the young host wishing them to see Las Animas Springs. He explained that the name was common among Mexicans, who called mountains, plains, ranches, rivers, and lakes by the title. The words, in their vernacular, have the significance of ghosts or spirits,

and as they are strangely superstitious, they clap them on to many of their possessions, hoping thereby to propitiate dwellers in the other world.

Las Animas Springs were on an elevated table-land of fifty acres, which rose a hundred feet from the surrounding prairie. There were four of them, not twenty yards apart. The largest was ten yards across the top, and the water bubbled so violently that at its center it was two feet higher than at the sides. Beautifully clear, the bottoms of these basins, made of bright sands and pebbles which shifted constantly into strange figures, were in plain view. The pebbles were of all hues, and the effect of their shifting and mixing was kaleidoscopic. Not the least strange feature of the springs was that each of them formed a fair-sized creek, and these flowed in differing directions — north, south, east, and west. The streams near to their sources were shallow and narrow, but widened out farther

down. Harry said that the high value of the surrounding lands was due to Las Animas Springs, which provided "permanent water," a desideratum with all stockmen who live in that country of frequent and prolonged droughts.

The boys drank of the sweet water, and found it to be of almost icy coldness. They unsaddled the horses, and permitted them to graze on the damp, rich herbage. They noticed that in the bushes round about birds were numerous, and all sorts of insects came to the springs. Though it was a late autumn month, bees hovered over the tules which grew at the edges of the basins, and there were other winged things of which they did not know the names. Donald, who was never still for long, rose directly and followed along the bank of the largest stream, which dived swiftly over the edge of the table-land and wound its way through a mesquit thicket growing below. He had been absent not more than five minutes

when the others heard him call excitedly, and found him gazing in wonder and horror at an object which was stationary in the middle of a plot of sand some six feet across. Donald was two yards from the thing, and was evidently unwilling to retreat and afraid to go on. Harry chuckled and said, "Tarantula!"

The great spider, black and hairy, had all of its legs spread out and dug into the soil. Its body was slightly raised, its mouth open, and its eyes gleamed wickedly. So spread it measured, legs and all, a good eight inches, but its body proper was not more than an inch and a half in diameter. Near by was a small hole in the ground, from which it had come to enjoy the sun. It had been discovered so by the boy, and, with the pugnacity of its kind, disdained to retreat. The arrival of the other two served to anger it more deeply, and slight white froth appeared at its mouth. Harry said it was "spitting cotton" and in an ex-

tremity of rage. He cut a slender branch from a tree close at hand, and trimmed it of twigs. It was two yards long. With this he struck the sand sharply two feet in front of the tarantula, which instantly leaped forward, endeavoring to seize the stick. It was a grotesque object when crouching for the jump, and more grotesque when it landed eighteen inches away, with limbs all "spraddled." Again the stick struck the sand, and again it leaped. This was repeated until it had left the sand and was crouched in the grass. It grew more and more angry, and the froth came from its mouth in drops. Harry had intended to kill it, but suddenly changed his mind. He sank upon his knees, telling his companions to follow his example, and then pointed upward.

They saw, hovering in small circles by the top of a mesquit-tree, an insect which looked much like a common wasp. Its body was black, its head of a rufous tint,

THE TARANTULA AND THE "TARANTULA-HAWK."

and its wings a bright, gauzy blue. Evidently it had a purpose in view, for it suddenly darted downward until only the height of a man above earth, and then placed itself directly over the spider. It began circling rapidly. The diameter of the circle was not more than two feet, and it made, possibly, thirty revolutions a minute. Plainly its purpose was to bewilder the tarantula, which, quite as plainly, was the object of attack. The spider, almost immediately aware of its danger, wheeled and started toward its hole. It made only a couple of leaps, however, and then determined that flight would be useless. It stopped, reared itself until its body was almost perpendicular, opened its semicircular mouth to full capacity, and, using its hind legs as a sort of pivot, turned slowly, endeavoring to keep the darting wasp in view. It was able to do this for a while, as its circle was so much smaller than that of its foeman. Harry whispered breathlessly that the wasp was

a "tarantula-hawk," and that the chances were a hundred to one that it would be successful in its attack. He was almost as excited as his cousins, and said:

"I 've seen this only once before, and you never heard of anything prettier. Tarantulas kill stock for us often, and the 'hawk' is our friend. Just keep still, will you, and give the little fellow a chance."

No one had moved, but the Cruger boys thereupon became as graven images. Donald held his breath until his eyes watered; then, remembering that he must breathe in order to live, blew it out in an explosive sigh, which did not affect the combatants, though Ralph hissed impatiently:

"Oh, turn your face the other way and blow a tree down, won't you?"

Suddenly the wasp darted downward. So swift was the motion that the eye could not follow it. A moment later, however, they saw that it had missed its

aim and was again hovering six feet above its target. As it swooped the tarantula had sprung two inches up to meet it, and its mouth had shut together savagely. Then the "hawk" dived and missed again, and then it shot upward to a height of twenty feet and hung motionless. It was visible, of course, to the boys, but the tarantula did not see it. That venomous one was still for half a minute, then lowered its body to earth and started for its burrow, not leaping, but rapidly crawling. It had traversed possibly a yard, and had regained the smooth yellow sand, when, like a bullet, the "hawk" was upon it. The onslaught was so swift and so unexpected that the spider had no time to rear itself. The wasp struck it fairly in the center of the back, thrust in its long sting, and was away again. The effect of the wound was almost instant paralysis. The tarantula drew together convulsively when stung, straightened out its legs, advanced feebly an inch or two,

and then lay still. A moment after it was dead.

Donald started toward it, saying something about a "specimen" and an "alcohol-bottle," but Harry grasped his arm.

"Wait," he said; "the show is n't over."

The wasp had remained nearly stationary above its dead antagonist, but now it descended cautiously, and, after one or two retreats, settled upon the body. Then, its wings making a buzzing equal to that of a half-dozen bees, it began to move the spider gradually toward the burrow. Inch by inch it made its way, now stopping to rest, now recommencing its toil with added vigor. It seemed a wonderful thing that so small an insect should move so great a weight, but it was done. Arrived at the hole, it began to dig into the body, and when it had made an orifice large enough to admit half of itself it became still for a while. Then it lighted upon the sand near by, placed its head against the spider, and, striving

furiously, pushed it into the burrow, down which it fell until out of sight. The wasp flew away, its task accomplished. Harry explained briefly the ultimate purpose of the affair.

"Tarantulas," he said, "are plentiful, and would do more damage but for the wasp you have seen. This wasp is its chief enemy, and slays thousands. It kills the tarantulas, not because it hates them especially, but because it needs them for nests. You saw the wasp sitting still upon the body? Well, it was laying eggs. When these eggs hatch, the young wasps will be inside the body, which does not decompose in this dry climate. They will feed upon the tarantula until they are able to fly. Then they will go out, and the females among them will kill other tarantulas. Because they are so destructive to this spider, which sometimes slays human beings, nobody in this country ever interferes with them. A Mexican herder who killed a tarantula-

hawk would be roundly abused by companions. The male wasps are distinguished from the females by being smaller, and their wings are of brighter hue. They do not hunt spiders. If you return to this hole a few days hence, and dig up the dead tarantula, you will find it to be full of little white wasps with their wings just beginning to form. You can, if you wish, watch the whole process. I have done it often, though I have seen the battle but once before."

Ralph saw another chance for a letter to the school society, and Don remarked that the next dead tarantula he found he was going to put in alcohol whether a "hawk" wanted it or not. Remounting their ponies, the boys started homeward. They had ridden possibly three miles when across an open space in their front a jack-rabbit darted. Its long ears were laid back close to its skull, its great black eyes were bulging, it was running upon all four legs, which showed that it was

hard pressed, and its leaps were short though rapid, which showed that it was fatigued. A chorus of shrill cries in its rear identified its pursuers, and a moment after three coyotes burst out of the underbrush not thirty yards behind it. Pursued and pursuers sped across the opening and disappeared upon the farther side. The drama occupied not more than five seconds in enactment. Harry shouted, "Come on!" and wheeled his horse upon the trail. The others followed, and together they breasted the wall of underbrush in their front. They ran for five hundred yards, and then suddenly their cousin checked and threw himself from the saddle. They dismounted also, and he pointed with his arm. Looking out, they saw a bit of prairie surrounded on all sides with cacti and mesquit. On its farther edge was an old tree of the poplar variety, commonly called cottonwood because of the tufts of down which it bears at certain seasons. The tree was

hollow, and near its bottom was a small entrance. Sitting within a yard of this entrance, and looking at it steadily, were the three coyotes. Their red tongues were hanging out and they were panting, but there was something stolid about their posture, which seemed to say that they were willing to wait a week, if necessary, but they knew that the rabbit would be obliged to come out sometime. Evidently the "jack" had found a temporary refuge, and just as evidently they were determined to starve him out. They had been so intent upon the chase, and were now so intent upon the siege, that they had not heard the boys, though the coyote is commonly one of the most wary animals in the world. Their backs were turned to the horses, and possibly the long heat of the run had affected their ears. Harry made no movement, and the brothers had ample opportunity to observe the little wolves. They found nothing attractive about them. Meaner-looking beasts they

had never seen. "Hang-dog," "sneak," "coward," "cruelty," were written large all over them. Of a dirty yellowish gray, small of stature and light of weight, with ribs showing through their hides and a generally unkempt air, they seemed a disreputable cross between a fox and a cur. Harry waited for a minute or so, and then muttered:

"Those fellows are great on young lambs. They will even tackle a small calf if its mother is a little way off. They rob turkey-nests. They kill madre's chickens when they stray into the brush. They are no good. Here goes!"

He drew a Winchester carbine from its scabbard under his right stirrup-leather, and dropped upon one knee. His left hand stole out and grasped the barrel so far forward that the arm was almost straight. His right cheek cuddled the stock lovingly, and his brown eye glanced through the sights. The right forefinger curved gently and steadily. There was

a sharp crack, and across the intervening green a coyote leaped straight up for a yard, and fell upon its back, kicking convulsively. The others were gone like a flash. They were invisible long before the emptied cartridge-case was ejected and fell upon the grass.

Each leading his horse, the boys walked to the tree and inspected the dead robber. They saw upon the side of the hole in the tree a few whitish hairs, showing that the rabbit had rubbed hard against it in the hurry of his harboring.

"The jack is a gentleman compared with this fellow," Harry said, stirring the body with his foot. "We could take a forked switch, of course, and twist him out of the tree-hollow, but it would only scare him half to death, and be of no good to us. A very hungry Mexican will sometimes eat a jack-rabbit if he can get it, but I never heard of any other sort of human being willing to dine on one. The meat is pretty nearly all sinew and has a

queer taste. This fellow in the tree has made a game run for his life, and we 'll let him go, eh?"

They had traveled a mile when Ralph threw up his head and sniffed strongly. He had detected a faint but exceedingly sweet perfume in the air. He was not the sort of boy that asks questions, so he kept silence. A quarter-mile farther on they came to the cause. Here the chaparral was composed almost wholly of the shrub called the "catclaw" because of its numerous small thorns, all bent backward like a hook and sharp and tenacious. These shrubs, acres of them, were milk-white with blossoms, and from the blossoms came the strangely delicious scent. The Crugers had never smelt anything like it, and it seemed to them that not any perfume of the great establishments of the cities could compare with it in delicacy and savor. It was strange to find so delicious an aroma in that partly arid country, in which were so many repellent and

semi-savage things. The flowers appeared a recompense sent by Providence to atone for much of the rudeness and meagerness of the land. They stopped and breathed, taking their lungs full and expelling the air luxuriously, feeling much comforted by this free offering of nature.

"The catclaw," Harry said, noticing their delight, "is not a pretty shrub, but it is a good thing to have around. It has no special time of year for blossoming; the blooms come whenever rain falls. You are as likely to find all this part of the chaparral white in February as in May. The cattle eat it, though I am sure I don't know how they get rid of the thorns, and the odor of the flowers is so permeating that it gets all through the flesh. Beef from an animal which has been feeding upon catclaw tastes just as these bushes smell. Some folks prefer it that way, but I can't say that I do. I want my meat plain. Madre likes the scent of the yellow huisache better, but

the catclaw is my favorite. I have sometimes thought that an adventurous or speculative man could make a fortune by coming here and distilling perfume from the flowers. He would have something delightful and odd, and the raw material would n't cost him anything. Once upon a time a cousin in Philadelphia sent me a bottle containing a drop or two of attar of roses. It was fine, but not equal to this scent that we have around us now."

"I know the attar quite well," said Ralph, "but I 'll take the catclaw every time."

As they rode through the low bushes in the warm sunshine, thousands of small bees, with light yellow bands around their bodies, hovered about them. Each of them, when it had collected its bagful, shot upward ten yards or so, and then darted away on a straight line southwest. The arrivals equaled the departures, and there was a steady interchange. Harry stopped and watched them critically for a

while. Then he turned in the saddle, pointed toward the Rio Grande hills, and said:

"Not a great way in that direction — maybe a mile, maybe three miles — there is a bee-tree. We can find it easily, I guess, and I vote that we go after it to-morrow."

CHAPTER V

A ROBBERY OF SWEETS

JUST at break of day next morning Harry rapped smartly on the brothers' door, then threw it wide and stepped in. He was booted and spurred.

"'Arise! Awake!'" he said. "'The village cock hath thrice done salutation to the coming morn.'"

He knew something of Shakspere, if nothing of Broadway.

"What is it?" Ralph asked, digging his knuckles into his eyes. Donald had not stirred.

"The bee-tree," Harry answered. "I told the madre of it last night, and she thought that wild honey would do well as an ornament to the morning waffles."

Don instantly had one leg out of bed. Like Æsop's blacksmith's dog, he would sleep through the noise of an anvil and wake at the cracking of a bone.

"Waffles!" he said. "Yes! And rice-cakes, too, and hot biscuit and hot light-bread and butter! Yes!"

Meantime he was hurrying into his clothes, while Ralph slowly followed. Outside the boys found a light road-wagon with two horses harnessed to it. Some of the hounds, seeing them, yelped mournfully from the kennel. A Mexican passing with a sack of corn, his black hair powdered with grain-dust, called cheerfully, "Buenas dias, señores!" The ample form of Jocosa the cook showed in the low door of her kitchen, and she beckoned to them. Black coffee and tortillas were given to them. Harry came swinging a small tin bucket, and had the reins an instant after.

"Honeycomb," he said in answer to looks of inquiry. "You can't find bee-

trees without it. We use it in trailing. The bee likes honey as well as we do — maybe better."

They drove straight for the acres of flowering catclaw they had seen the day before. A fat old pointer, which spent most of its time sleeping in the sun or snapping at flies, followed them for a little way. Then it pursued violently a jack-rabbit which leaped from the grass to one side of the trail. The chase lasted for half a mile in plain view, and with every yard the distance between pursuer and pursued increased. The rabbit ran with its left fore leg doubled nonchalantly in a crook, deeming three ample to keep it beyond the danger zone. Finally the pointer returned to them, red of eye, with its tail between its legs, looking up sheepishly. Harry laughed at it, whereupon it turned doggedly about and went home, its feelings much hurt.

Over the white expanse of the catclaw the bees were buzzing and darting, though

the sun was not yet an hour high. There were so many of them that they made a thin stream coming and going, and it was impossible to follow any individual bee in its flight. Harry noted the general direction of those which left laden, and drove easily along, throwing up his head now and then to note the tiny dark objects shooting over him at a height of fifty feet. The boys saw that the wild bees flew as directly as a rifle-bullet and with great swiftness. They seemed to have an upward trend, and when three quarters of a mile had been traversed were out of sight. Curiously enough, by listening intently their humming could be heard.

Harry continued to drive on until a good mile had been covered, then dismounted and hitched his horses. He cut a forked stick two feet long from a mesquit, sharpened its lower end, then, going fifty yards from the wagon, stuck it upright in the ground, placed a large piece of honeycomb upon it, and lay down two yards from it, watching it closely.

Fifteen minutes passed in this way, the scent of the grass in their nostrils, and a blue white-flecked sky overhead. The sun was uncomfortably warm beating down upon their backs, but they had grown used to it and did not mind it. Donald had found a bare place six inches across, and in its center a tiny hole running straight down. He had inserted a long grass-spear for eight inches, and waited results. Directly the spear was shaken, and then hoisted mightily straight upward for an inch. He took hold of the end, drew it up gently but firmly, and clinging to its lower end was a bug which looked a good deal like a worm, only it was white, with a horny head and pincers. This he had heard called a "doodle-bug," and "fishing for doodle-bugs" was a habit of Juan's. Ralph watched him with deep contempt; but Don thrust the "doodle-bug" into his pocket, muttering that it was good bait for perch and he would use it that afternoon. In his pocket it became stuck to his half-melted pelon-

cillo, from which it was afterward detached with effort and thrown away.

Suddenly, diving swiftly from nowhere, a bee hovered over the honey. It was one of those bound for the catclaw bushes, but had found a superior sweetness nearer home. It buzzed for only a moment, then settled down to its work. Only a few seconds were required to fill its honey-bag; then it made a half-dozen tiny circles, and shot upward and away. Harry followed it intently with his eyes. The other boys lost sight of it before it had gone fifty feet; but his keen brown eyes narrowed and he continued gazing. Then he rose, unhitched the horses, and led them onward, carrying his forked stick and honeycomb. They traversed a half-mile, then stopped, and the stick was set up again. This time a bee found it in less than five minutes, and the march was resumed. This setting and baiting of a honey-trap and the flight of the little marauder was thrice repeated. Ahead of

them the boys could see a line of trees marking the course of an arroyo. Harry went to it without hesitation, and began walking along its banks, looking up at the tree-tops. Finally he stopped with a satisfied smile, and pointed at a dead cottonwood which, bare of leaves, twigs, and smaller limbs, rose some fifty feet like a crooked stained gray column. Into and out of a round hole four inches in diameter bees were constantly passing. Laying their ears to the barkless trunk, the boys heard a murmurous roar inside. The hole was fully thirty feet above ground, and the first limb was only ten feet below it. The tree was three feet thick at the base, and its body nearly as smooth as glass.

"What now?" Ralph asked.

"Why," Harry replied, "we 'll smoke these fellows first, if there is a hollow all of the way up; then I 'll climb and chop a hole into the honey."

Ralph looked at the smooth trunk too

large to be grasped by arms, and the large limb twenty feet above them, and smiled to himself. He had come rather to fancy himself as a climber, but acknowledged that that particular cottonwood was too much for him, and suspected that his cousin was over-confident. Paying no attention to the covert grin, knowing apparently just what to do and how to do it, Harry walked around the tree, and on its far side, reaching to the ground, found a cavity a foot high and a foot wide; in fact the tree was merely a shell. In this cavity he placed dried twigs, set them to blazing, and on the blaze piled green grass, leaves, and a little moss. Up the tree poured a stream of thick white smoke. A great deal of it came out at the bee-hole; the remainder was inside, packed like wool. Returning bees buzzed about the entrance, and one or two of them made an effort to go in, but gave it up.

"The hive is thick with them," Harry

said in explanation, "but this stupefies them. No, it does n't kill them. We 'd get beautifully stung if it were not for the smoke."

Ten minutes later all buzzing had ceased, and he remarked: "We 'll get some honey now."

Ralph looked at him, then at the tree.

"Going up?" he asked quizzically.

"Yes, sir."

"When?"

"Now," with a look of surprise. It had not occurred to Harry that anybody doubted his ability to climb the cotton-wood. To him it was an ordinary matter.

"How far?"

"Up to the bee-hole."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

Ralph gazed at him calmly, impartially, judicially. "You can't get your arms about the trunk," he said. "You can't get your legs around it. There is no hold for your hands. You have a certain

amount of inertia to overcome. It 's clearly against the laws of gravitation; it 's against the laws of mathematics."

Harry smiled. "Why," he said, "the thing is simple enough. I 've climbed trees that were harder because the climb was further. I might toss a rope over that limb you see up there, and go up hand over hand, but there is a better way."

He went to the wagon and got out a rope and a small sharp ax. The ax he thrust into his belt, but the rope he passed twice about the tree loosely, then knotted the ends. He stepped inside of the circle of rope, and brought it about to his middle, leaning back hard against it. It was thus tightened against the further side of the tree. Ralph was astonished to see him start up, first hitching the rope a couple of feet higher, then, leaning against it, work upward with hands and knees. Almost he might be said to have walked up the tree on his knees. Soon

he was at the fork of the big limb, and, bestriding it, looked down and chuckled.

"There is a little knack in it," he said, "but you would soon learn it." Don meanwhile had wisely kept his lips closed. He had seen Harry do so many odd things that he had almost come to believe that nothing was impossible to him.

Above the boy's head were other limbs, making the climbing easy. He went rapidly up to the bee-hole, took the ax from his belt, and began chopping. In five minutes he had an orifice a foot square. The blows resounded through the hollow tree and shook it from top to bottom. He let down the rope by which he had climbed, and asked them to tie a bucket to it, putting in a scoop they would find in the wagon. They did so, and he began to dig out the honey, bringing it in great luscious golden slabs more than an inch thick. The fluid dripped from the edges of the scoop, and Don stood under with his mouth open, trying

to catch it, but only got some in his eye. When the bucket was filled it was lowered, and another was attached. In this way Harry filled three of the buckets, in all some forty pounds of honey. It was of a beautiful clearness, the wax very firm and white, and it had in its flavor something of the perfume of the catclaw blossoms.

"There is a wagon-load of it up here," Harry called, "but I reckon we 've got enough. Pass me up two of the short boards in the wagon, please."

They were sent up, and, taking some nails from his pocket, he proceeded to fasten them lengthwise over the orifice, leaving only the original round hole through which the bees came and went.

"The Mexicans," he remarked, as his feet once more touched the grass, "when they find a bee-tree, first smoke the bees, then cut down the tree and split it open, taking all of the honey and breaking up the hive. If this is done late in the fall, all

of the bees will die of cold and starvation. At any rate, the hive is destroyed. Madre has always cautioned me against this. It is not only cruelty to one of the smartest and busiest of insects, but it is sheer waste. Bees put up a great deal more honey than they can eat. That tree is lined with it for eight or ten feet up and down. I can come back next season and get as much honey as, and as often as, I want. I have only to smoke the little fellows and prize off the boards. As you have seen, when smoked they are perfectly harmless. They can't sting, and—"

Ralph jumped two feet into the air, yelled shrilly, and slapped wildly at his nose with both hands. Then he traveled swiftly in a circle, and doubled over, holding to the projecting member. Tears ran out of his eyes, and he grunted, "Bee! Bee! Bee!" Two small brown insects darted away. Out of the orifice the reawakened toilers were pouring angrily.

They swung loudly about the tree-trunk, high up, not seeing their despoilers. Donald scampered to the wagon and got behind it. Harry took his cousin by the arm and led him in the same direction.

"We can't stay here now," he said. "They 'd eat us up alive."

The three hastily clambered into the vehicle, and Harry whipped up the horses. As fast as they went, some of the bees saw them and came straight. There were not more than a half-dozen of them, however, and they were beaten off easily by Don, who wielded his coat. Harry was busy with the reins, and Ralph was squeezing his nose. One insect had struck him upon the very tip; the other had driven in its sting over the left eye.

"Take," said Harry, "some wax from your ear and rub it on the hurts with your finger."

Ralph did this, and the pain was sensibly diminished. He looked ruefully at Don, and that youngster looked away.

Not for worlds would he have laughed, but he was only human, and a boy at that. So he gazed steadily to the rear and bit his lips. Ralph's nose was swelled to twice its size and was a glorious red. His left eyebrow was mightily puffed. He knew that the tears had run, but this was because of the locality of the sting and not because of the pain. He tried to look dignified and to pass the matter off, but this attempt was a failure. Stopping at a clear, still spring to water the horses, he got a reflection of his face, and wisely tied it up in a handkerchief.

"Now," he said savagely to Don, "you can grin at this if you want to."

"I have not grinned once," Don replied excitedly, "but goodness knows I wanted to. I looked away on purpose."

Ralph switched the conversation to bicycling in Central Park; but Harry knew nothing about this, and Donald was not interested. So the remainder of the drive was made in silence. At the ranch-

house Jocosa made a poultice of tobacco-leaves, and, though it smelled horribly, Ralph bound it on to reduce the swelling, which it did. Next morning he showed but slight traces of his encounter. He attacked the honey viciously, feeling that he had earned it; but even then he was far behind Don, who was first at table, stayed until the others rose, and left only when his aunt refused to permit him to eat any more waffles. At ten o'clock he was found in the kitchen wheedling Jocosa into baking another batch, and was dragged out by the others.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHASE OF THE MUSTANGS

THE three boys rode slowly down a gentle slope, the mesquit-grass coming above the fetlocks of their horses. It grew slender-speared and close, making a carpet of beautiful and even texture. Here and there it was turning brown. Don said that it was dying, but Harry said no, that it was "curing." He explained that this grass, like the bunch-grass of the Northwest, "cures" on the ground, and becomes a fine article of upstanding hay with its roots still clinging. It saves the ranchman the trouble of mowing and building stacks. He went on to say that a horse which feeds upon it does not become large of abdomen like other grass-

fed horses, but retains its trim shape, is powerfully muscled, and its coat shines like satin. It is very wonderful pasturage indeed, superior in nutriment and effect to the Bermuda, or to the common American field grasses, or to bunch-grass, or even to the famed Kentucky blue-grass.

"The Rio Grande country," said Harry, "is, of all countries, best fitted for horse-raising, and it seems queer that there was not a horse in it till the Spaniards came. Even the Aztecs, with all of their civilization, had nothing to ride. I believe that if they had possessed cavalry Cortez would n't have got twenty miles from the coast-line."

The boys were hunting for strayed "saddle-stock" or "stock-horses," which means horses broken, or half broken, and used in working cattle. In autumn the mesquit-tree bears a long pod of beans, which turns a rusty brown, almost black. These beans are exceedingly sweet and make excellent food. More than one

man lost in the chaparral has subsisted upon them roasted, and they make a fair article of imitation coffee. When they are ripe, horses are fond of them, and will walk from tree to tree, picking such as they can reach. In this way a horse will travel from five to ten miles in a day, and is apt to stray from its range, just as the wild turkey will trot ten miles in a day, going from bush to bush bearing the small round pepper called *chile patin.* In the morning a trail had been found and followed closely by Harry, but it was lost at the crossing of an arroyo. Probably the straying horses had wandered downstream for some distance. They were now returning to the ranch to start two of the Mexican trailers, who would stay out until they got the truants.

They were so far west of the rancheria that the line of squat blue hills beyond the Rio Grande was in plain view. Around them were the mighty rolls of the prairie, green and brown to the sum-

mits, like waves of earth and vegetation cast up and held stationary. A soft breeze was at their backs. On a rise two hundred yards ahead of them a horse suddenly showed, sharply outlined against the blue of the sky behind. It gazed at them a moment, its ears pointed forward, its fore legs wide apart, its nostrils flaring. They marked its long mane and a certain wildness and freedom about it. There was a dauntless liberty expressed in its pose. Even the Crugers knew instantly that it had never felt the gall of the saddle or cruel constriction of the curb. Then it wheeled as if upon a pivot, and was gone.

Harry said softly, "Come on!" and leaned over the neck of the gray. They tore up the opposite slope, crouched low, with loosened reins and knees in-pressed. As they rose to its summit, almost involuntarily they sent in the spurs, and Donald, tossing his right hand high, gave a shrill boyish cheer.

A quarter of a mile away, and going like the wind, was a band of not less than twenty-five horses, and every one of them a bright blood bay. They raced side by side, their manes uptossing on the wind like armfuls of ebon silk, and the rolling roar of their hoofs was hollow as the pounding of surf. Two lengths in front the great sentinel stallion swept along, going easily, his powerful limbs working like some beautiful machine, and the others followed without balk or hesitation. Now and then he called to them shrilly, and one or more answered, assuring him that all was well as yet.

Once Harry dropped his hand to the pommel and half unfastened his lasso, but shook his head and settled into the saddle. A half-mile was passed and not a foot gained. Then the mustangs widened out as if at word of command, and, almost abreast, took in a flying leap of fifteen feet a dry arroyo which crossed their path. Harry drew rein, and called

to his cousins to do likewise. Ralph obeyed instantly, but Donald checked only when he saw the great ditch yawning. Once more together, with no increase or lessening of speed, the wild steeds swept up a rise and disappeared beyond.

"It 's no use to follow them," Harry said, with some quickening of the breath. "We 'd have trouble holding one of them, even if we lassoed it, and I don't know that we could catch them. Our horses are carrying weight, you see, and they run without an extra pound. I 'd back Tordillo [his pony] to run rings around any mustang between here and Saltillo, but they 've got too much start. We 'll come back for them."

Riding homeward he told them something about the mustangs of the Southwest.

"Not many are left in this section," he said. "Hunting them used to be quite an industry, and they are thinned. That is the first bunch I have seen in six

months. Probably it came from Mexico, crossing the river at any one of a dozen fords. You noticed that all of them were bays? The mustangs have a trick of breeding to color. I have seen bands all grays, all sorrels, or all blacks. Stranger still, they are sometimes of a single gait. Near the Motte de Gallo there used to be a band of fifteen, and every one a pacer. That was the only gait they had, and there never was a horse after them fast enough to make them break their pace. Similarly there was once a large bunch south of here, all of them trotters. They were not so swift as the pacers, and when forced out of the trot broke into a lumbering gallop, not better than half-speed. Even at that I dare say that any one of them could have gone a mile on level ground in less than 2.30.

"Mustangs in this section are larger than elsewhere, owing to an admixture of American blood. When General Taylor's army was camped on the Lower Rio Grande

before the invasion of Mexico, many of his cavalry and artillery horses got away into the brush and joined the mustangs. That gave the wild ones bone. The members of that band which we saw just now were quite as large as the ranch horses, and two or three of them were nearly sixteen hands. We will try to capture those fellows, though they are not worth much in market. Five dollars around would be a good price for them."

"Why?" Ralph asked.

"Well, they are hard to break to saddle, and they will not stay broken. You may ride a mustang for two years steadily, then give him six weeks in the brush, and you 'll have to run him ten miles to pen him. Then rope him, throw him, bridle him, blindfold him, saddle him, and get on him, and he 'll buck as long as he can get off the ground. They never lose their wish for freedom, nor their confidence in bucking. This stays with them through the third generation. A half-

mustang is certain to be a bucker on and off during his life, and a quarter-bred will always buck when first saddled. In the fourth generation, however, they become good Americans, and may buck or not, just as their dispositions may be."

Ralph had some romantic notions about mustangs, and put a series of questions, to most of which he got negative answers. Were they fleeter than American horses? Stronger? More enduring? More intelligent?

"They are not faster," Harry said, "because they are smaller. In horses the big ones will almost always beat the little ones. They are not stronger for the same reason. They are not more enduring, because no horse fed on grass, even if it be mesquit-grass, will go as far as one fed on corn, oats, and hay, though they are not so apt to become overheated. They are not more intelligent, because they have not been taught for hundreds of years. There is a far-back

Arabian strain in almost all of our horses, and the Eastern peoples have been making a friend of the horse for centuries. In certain things, however, they are superior to the American horse, because their wild life has developed these faculties. They both see and hear better, for instance. They have a much stronger instinct of locality, which is to say that they can find their way to and from any place much more easily and directly. They are hardier, stand exposure, hunger and thirst better. They are better swimmers. They have an acute sense of smell, which the tame horse has n't got. That fellow which saw us first came to the top of the rise and took a look because he smelled us. You remember, the wind was blowing from us to him."

"You said that you would come back after them," Don ventured. "Do you think we can outrun them?"

"We could if it were necessary," Harry answered, "and run them off their legs,

too, since our horses are corn-fed; but we 've a better way than that."

"Traps?" Don asked anxiously.

"No."

"Shooting them through the upper part of the neck — creasing them?"

"No. Creasing was never any good. The creasers killed more mustangs than they captured."

"How then?"

Harry grinned affably. "If I told you, Señor Don," he remarked teasingly, "you would n't be able to sleep to-night and you 'd lose that slight appetite. You 'll know to-morrow, and I promise that if you want to help you shall."

Arrived at the rancheria, Harry held conference with his "majordomo." That worthy was pleased. After some talk and tales of former mustang hunts, he began counting upon his brown fingers.

"Fo'!" he said. "Eet ees 'nough. Gregorio, Trinidad, José, an' Pancho! We go mañana fo' sho, no?"

Next morning the party started, the four Mexicans and the three boys on horseback. There was a wagon containing an A tent, provisions, and corn for the horses. They drove directly across the prairie to a point on the range where the mustangs had been discovered, and made camp on the bank of a shallow creek which came suddenly out of the ground a mile above them and went as suddenly into the ground two miles below. It made its way eventually underground to the Rio Grande. There are many such in the Southwest. Three of the Mexicans staked out their horses, and all four of them, turning to, had the tent up and a fire made in a jiffy. One of them, Trinidad, rolled a pinch of black tobacco into a corn-shuck, lit it, deeply inhaled a mouthful of smoke, swung himself into the saddle, and saying, "Adios, amigos!" rode gravely out of sight.

The two brothers stared with round eyes. The Mexicans, in no wise con-

cerned, set leisurely about getting dinner. Harry turned to his cousins.

"The mustangs," he said, "will be walked down, not run down. It is more trouble, but more certain. All quadrupeds in a wild state have a certain range. They are used to it, it is home to them, and they dislike to forsake it. They leave it only when food fails. If driven off, they are sure to return within twenty-four hours. Trinidad will find the herd of mustangs, and they will run from him. He will simply follow upon the trail, traveling slowly. A few miles farther on he will find them again, and they will run again. However far or often they go, they will travel in a circle, and will come back to this neighborhood. When they do, he will come into camp, and another of the men will take up the trail. He may have to ride for three hours or all night; there is no telling: but he will stay with them until relieved.

"In this way the mustangs will get no

rest at all. After a while they will be too tired to run, and then we will pen them. I do not know how long this will take, but certainly three days and nights, maybe four, maybe five. It depends to a certain extent upon the spirit and gameness of the horses, and a great deal upon whether or not they can get to water. As this is a well-watered range, there will be probably a long pursuit. We will go home, and ride out from day to day to see how the men are getting on."

Ralph and Donald were for staying at least until Trinidad came in; so they ate their bacon, broiled by holding on sticks in the blaze, flat, heavy bread baked in a frying-pan, and drank black coffee out of smoked tin cups, then amused themselves as they best could during the afternoon. Moonlight came, and with it supper, but no Trinidad. Then, without warning, the mustangs burst over a hill beyond the arroyo, saw the camp-fire, and wheeled thunderously to the right, going north-

ward. Apparently they were as fresh and speedy as ever. The Mexicans, sitting upon their heels, stopped smoking long enough to watch them philosophically; then Pancho rose, saddled his horse, and stood waiting. In half an hour Trinidad came down the hill at a gentle trot, stopped to water his steed, then saluted and dismounted.

"They are still running," he remarked, loosening the girths. "'T is a fine herd."

Pancho stooped for a coal, lit his cigarito, mounted, said, "Adios, amigos," softly, and followed on the trail, at a walk.

Going to the camp next morning after breakfast, the boys saw the herd of wild horses at a distance of half a mile, traveling at a fast trot. Fifteen minutes afterward a solitary rider showed on their trail, and waved his hand at them. He, too, was riding at a trot, evidently determined to give the band little rest. His horse moved as if untired, and Harry said that the man was Gregorio.

"These mustangs," he added, "are not making much of a circle. They like this range. That being so, they will be pushed hard."

In the afternoon Gregorio came to the tent with the report that the herd had passed a mile away, showing signs of wear, and José went out. This was a light young fellow mounted on a big dun horse, and he had a reputation as a hard, bruising rider. He had not returned when the cousins went home. On the third day Trinidad was once more in the saddle. When he ended his "spell" of six hours the mustangs were breaking into a slow trot whenever he appeared, but dropping to a walk as soon as they were out of sight. He was never more than a mile behind them. Pancho relieved him, and rode until ten o'clock that night, when Gregorio went out, and kept up the pursuit till daylight. Again it became José's turn, who told them at two in the afternoon that another twenty-four

hours of ceaseless going would finish the fugitives. They had drunk frequently, but for two days had snatched only a mouthful of grass here and there, and would often lie down from fatigue and lack of sleep. He had ridden within a hundred yards of them, and they had only broken into a short jog-trot.

In the forenoon of the fifth day all four of the Mexicans went after the herd, the boys with them. The mustangs were in truly pitiable condition, their flanks sunken, their heads hanging nearly to their knees, dried sweat upon them in flakes, their eyes red, their steps stumbling. The old stallion, still in the lead, his black forelock hanging to his nostrils, shuffled along, and after him trailed his exhausted followers. They had no speed in them; their spirit was utterly broken. Riding close to them, Trinidad whirled his doubled lariat and brought it down upon the back of the rearmost. The horse trotted lamely for a yard or

two, then relapsed into its patient, slow walk.

A mile away was Altita pen, built of uprights and brushwood, inclosing half an acre of level ground. It was used in corralling the wilder "stock-horses." To this the herd was driven. It went without resistance, no member of it trying to break away. Once inside, the bars were put up and fodder was tossed over the fence. In its center was a huge wooden trough filled with water. Not a mustang drank or offered to touch the food. One and all, they lay down upon the bare earth, their sides heaving. Their ribs showed plainly through the skin, though five days back they had been fat.

"They 'll be all right to-morrow," Harry said as they rode away, "and the breaking will begin. They will be sold to drovers, all except their leader, who will be set free. He is old and untamable, and of no use to anybody."

"Will he gather another herd?" Ralph asked.

"Only if he is strong enough to whip its stallion; but he will try."

"I feel, somehow," said Don, "as if he had not been fairly treated, and I hope that he 'll gather a family."

"That is natural; but how about the one he whips?"

There was no answer to this.

CHAPTER VII

HORSEMANSHIP AND COWMANSHIP

"I DON'T know what particular saint's day it is," Harry said; "they have nearly three hundred and sixty-five in a year: but the Mexicans are holding a fiesta at Encinal. Would you like to see it?"

"We should, very much," said Ralph; "and what is a fiesta?"

"A fiesta is a feast, or, as we would translate it, a fair, though it has few features of a country fair about it. There are no fat live stock, big chickens, pumpkins, and garden-sass exhibited. There are booths, however, stalls wherein things are sold, restaurants under canvas, horse-racing, dancing, and so forth. Encinal,

which is a little bit of a town in a thick cactus country, is a good forty miles from here, but we can ride it easily in less than a day, stay with some of my Mexican acquaintances, and come back two days later."

Ralph and Donald found that the most interesting thing about the fiesta was the people they saw there. Some few American ranchmen lounged about with their wives and daughters, but in mass the men and women were olive-skinned, black-haired, and jetty-eyed. They came not only from the neighboring country, but from far into Mexico. There were Coahuila Mexicans, Nuevo Leon Mexicans, and Tamaulipas Mexicans, differing considerably from each other, but all bent on having a good time. Fat babies with not too many clothes rolled in the sand of the plaza. Slender small maidens, their heads swathed in mantillas, moved lightly about, or danced to the sound of castanets. There was a musical band, and all of the

instruments were guitars, eight of them. One guitar was seven feet high and two feet across the bottom. Another had thirty-two strings. They made very good music. In the booths were goods of Mexican hand-make: saddles, hair ropes and bridles, gaudy blankets, heavily tinseled sombreros of wool and straw, *morals*, which are nose-bags to hold horse-feed, red, blue, and green pictures of saints, specimens of beautiful drawn-work in linen, and all sorts of *dulces*, sweet things in cakes and candies. At one of these places Don wrecked himself and had the stomach-ache all night. The dances were held in a stockade sixty feet square, made of mesquit poles ten feet long driven upright into the ground, and the dancers danced on the bare earth to the thrumming of the guitars, with the red light of torches flaring on them; very graceful and inspiring dances they were, and entirely innocent. One huge tent was devoted to *loteria*, a complicated

form of keno, where everybody, grandmothers and grandfathers, husbands and wives, maidens and youths and little children, gambled for *medios*, silver coins worth six and a quarter cents.

Gregorio, of the Rincon ranch, was there and had set up a tent. In this the boys slept on hay, wrapped in their blankets, and were waked at daylight by Mexicans nasally singing the morning hymn. Gregorio was in fine feather. He was a little bandy-legged chap with great black mustachios, and his hat, covered with gilt tinsel from rim to crown, was nearly a yard across the brim. A brilliant yellow banda was about his middle; his short round jacket was of black velvet trimmed with silver; his trousers, fitting him as if his legs had been melted and poured into them, were of crimson velvet, and gold buttons ran down the outer seam; his boots were like mirrors; the rowels of his brass spurs were two inches in diameter. With Harry he

habitually spoke his Spanish patois, but his wonderful English was exercised for the benefit of the Cruger lads.

"Eet ees to me fo' de honah hof el rancho Rincon to be here," he would say — "to me, Gregorio Francisco Antonio Ramon Jesus Maria Pablo Luis Garza. Trin'dad, Pancho, Juan Salazar, dey haf fear to come. Eet ees to me fo' de rope contes' an' de vaquero ridin'. Yo' bet on me, no? No be 'fraid fo' me! I haf Gruya!"

He referred to a big blue horse which he owned and worshiped.

"We won't bet on you, Gregorio," Harry said. "Ralph and I don't bet, and Don is broke. But we 'll watch you and whoop for you, and tell all of the girls at the ranch about you when we get back."

"'T ees well," the little rider answered, puffing out his cheeks and striking an attitude with his hands on his hips; "but I ween sho', me. Gruya ees here!"

The riding contest was announced for

the morning, the roping contest for the afternoon. It was to see these events mainly that the boys had come. The riding course was a hundred yards long and thirty yards wide, over firm turf. There were twenty contestants, some natives of Texas, some of Mexico, and much rivalry had developed. The contest consisted wholly of trick or "fancy" riding. Any man of them was able to sit the worst bucker that ever came off the ranges, so merely unbroken horses were barred. The boys saw feats of horsemanship that they would not otherwise have believed to be possible. Men rode at full speed in the hard, smooth, high-pommeled, high-cantled saddles, sometimes with, sometimes without, stirrups; they rode with faces to the front or rear; they rode at full length on stomach or back, their hands in the air; they rode swinging far down to the side, holding by right heel to cantle and left hand to mane, Comanche fashion; they

rode standing up on two feet, or on one; they swung downward in full career and snatched hats, handkerchiefs, and finally silver dollars, from the ground; they leaped to earth with their horses tearing past, and, holding to pommel or mane, leaped lightly back to their seats without apparent effort. It was magnificent horsemanship, but there were degrees of it, and the contest soon narrowed down to three who in skill, grace, and strength were manifestly superior. Gregorio, alas! was not one of these. He had come to grief in the dollar test, his brilliantly spurred heel slipping from the cantle. He had rolled head over heels a few times, then got up unhurt, dusted his velvet breeches, and consoled himself by announcing loudly: "Eet ees to me fo' de rope contes'."

Of the three remaining contestants one was from Monterey, one from Piedras Negras, Mexico, and the third was a Texan named Juan Moro, from Za-

valla County. A line was drawn across the course, and the competitors were required to ride at it at full speed, and stop their horses on its farther side as soon as might be, the one stopping within the shortest space to be declared winner. Like bullets the men went by, and, as the fore feet of their steeds crossed the line, swayed far back upon the bits. The horse of the man from Piedras Negras went down upon its haunches smartly enough, but slid ten feet; Juan Moro and the Monterey man both stopped within two yards.

With but two contestants left, and they from rival republics, excitement became intense. The partizans ranged themselves upon each side of the course, and the air was filled with a babel of cries, exhortations, and jeers. The supreme test of the day was at hand. At one end of the course a round post six inches through and eight feet high had been set up. The men were ordered to ride at it hard

and go around it in the smallest possible circle. Lots were drawn; the Monterey champion won, and elected to ride first. His horse, a strong brown animal with fine legs, had been trained in every trick of the field, and looked at the post with an eye of recognition. He had been ridden in such contests before, and knew what was asked of him. At word of command he launched out, and, nearing the post, slowed up a trifle. His rider placed his hand upon it and swung him sharply to the right. He did his best, but half-way around was carried off by his momentum, and the Mexican, clinging desperately to the post, was snatched from the saddle, falling heavily. From the Texas side shrill vivas went up.

Juan Moro had shortened his stirrups by an inch, and sat crouching, his eyes fixed intently on his target. Next instant he was away, the reins tightened savagely, but the spurs deeply driven in. He reached the post, slapped his brown

hand upon it, and swung so far down to the right that it seemed his body would strike it. As if standing upon a pivot and governed by springs, his horse whirled around it and made the circle completely, the hand never leaving the wood. In making this circle certainly not more than a second was occupied. The man and horse seemed literally to have whirled in air. The people were silent for a space, then burst into wild acclaim. The Texans pulled Juan from his seat and carried him on their shoulders; they unsaddled the horse, put wreaths about its neck, and tied bright ribbons in its mane and tail. Don, being from New York, was necessarily on fire for Texas, and, when his man won, rolled on the ground, kicked up his short legs, and screamed. Ralph grabbed him by the collar and jerked him upright.

"What 's the matter with you?" he asked. "You 're a Yank!"

"You bet I 'm a Texan," said Don. "'Rah!"

"The winner is a Mexican," Ralph went on, grinning.

"You bet he 's a Texas Mexican! 'Rah for el Mexicano Americano! 'Rah!"

"It 's dinner-time," said Ralph, as a last resort.

Don checked another yell and said: "Come on!"

The scene of the roping contest in the afternoon was a wide, level prairie. A large pen had been built, and in this some forty beeves were confined. A narrow lane or passageway had been built out from one side of it, and there was a gate at the outer end of the passage. From this the cattle were to emerge one by one. They were full-grown and wild, and moved around and around in the pen, longing to escape. When one stepped into the passageway, bars were let down behind it.

The first contestant sat upon his horse by the gate. The conditions were that his lariat should be looped at his saddle-

bow, not held in his hand, and that the escaping cow or steer should have thirty yards of start. The rider was required to pursue the animal at the word of command, take down his lariat, prepare its noose, rope the fugitive by the horns, throw it, and tie three of its feet together to prevent its rising. Three men with watches acted as judges. Gregorio was on hand, his face shining with confidence, and the "gruya" was double cinched.

The word was given, and a large steer sprang out, shaking its horns, and darted away across the prairie. Thirty yards behind came the horseman. Ere he had traversed fifty yards, his lariat was loosed, poised in his right hand, and its wide circle was whirling. He closed the gap to fifteen yards, then, leaning forward, made his cast. The rawhide rope leaped through the air, hung for an instant over the animal's head, then settled, but upon one horn only. The pony instantly threw its hind feet under it and braced for the shock; but

the lariat slipped off, and the steer went on. The disappointed vaquero gathered up his lariat as fast as he could, renewed the chase, and at the next cast roped the animal. The pony became again a statue, and the steer was thrown violently when it came to the end of the rope, lying upon its back with its neck stretched out so that it could not move. The Mexican leaped down, ran to it, holding short rawhide thongs in his hand, and tied the feet together rapidly, then threw up his right hand as a signal to the time-keepers that his task was accomplished. They rode forward at a gallop, inspected the work, and said that it was good. The time from the first dash of the steer until the hand was raised was only three and a half minutes. Ralph and Donald wondered greatly, but Harry said that it was nothing.

"The man does not stand a chance," he said. "Missing the first cast put him out of the contest. The time of the winner will be well under a minute."

Gregorio was the next horseman. He sat the "gruya" with an easy grace, looked at the boys and smiled, then bowed to the people at large. The gate was thrown open, there was a shout, and a large black beef, his horns almost snow-white, his eyes as red as coals, dashed forth with a bellow, and scampered away with remarkable speed. Getting the word, Gregorio dashed in the huge rowels and was off like a rocket, his velvet jacket fluttering in the wind, his great sombrero on his shoulders, held to his neck by a string, and doing something doubtless to impede his progress and movements. The black beef was so swift that three hundred yards were covered before the pursuer was within casting distance. Then, being a "wary, cool old sworder," the animal half wheeled just as the lariat was sent forth, and its loop fell harmlessly to the ground. Gregorio gathered it up and cast again when within distance. Again the beef whirled and was missed. As yet

the rawhide thong had not touched it. The little Mexican, wild with vexation, made yet another effort, missed completely, and kept on at full gallop, headed northward. Directly the mesquits closed behind him and he was lost to view. There was a roar of derision, and Harry said, laughing:

"He has gone straight home. He will have told some rare stories by the time we get there."

The victorious beef had also disappeared, and no one took the trouble to follow it. One after one the cattle came from the pen and were roped, thrown, and tied, for the most part with marvelous celerity and precision. The "times" ran from a minute and a half to fifty-five seconds. It did not seem possible that this time could be reduced.

In compliment to their contest of the morning, Juan Moro and his Monterey opponent were reserved to the last. Juan ran first. His beef, a large red animal

with white spots and wide horns, was thrown hard within seventy-five yards of the gate, and tied without a second's delay. Time, forty-nine seconds.

The Monterey man, Victor Espinosa by name, looked at this with white, set face. His knees were clenched upon the saddle, and he stared straight ahead of him. It was plain that he would do his best. At the word he dropped the reins upon the pommel, trusting to his highly trained horse to follow every movement of the fleeing beef, and sunk in the spurs. He was within thirty feet of his prey by the time he could set his lariat to whirling. It shot out as straight as a rule, settled fairly upon the horns, and the next instant the big dun animal struck the earth with a crash. Espinosa leaped from his saddle even before the lariat tightened, fell to his knees upon the prostrate beef's side, then threw his hand up. The judges rode forward, doubting that a tie had been made, but found the knots fastened in

workmanlike manner. Time, thirty-three seconds.

"That," said Harry, "is a world's record, I reckon. I have never heard of it being equaled."

Victor bowed often to the plaudits of his countrymen, and the honors between the two republics were even.

The boys that night watched a *baile*, as the dance was called, and listened to a singing match between three noted ranch quartettes, all of whom sang through their noses, dwelling for an unspeakable time on the last note of each measure. The quartette which hung on longest and was most nasal won.

Next morning the boys were in the saddle at daylight, and, the horses going freely, dismounted at the ranch one hour after noon.

CHAPTER VIII

AN HOUR BY THE SWIMMING-HOLE

THE water in the "swimming-hole" had a temperature of seventy-five degrees,—it varied scarcely ten degrees in a year,—and the boys were splashing about in it hugely. Harry had swum well since his eighth year; Ralph had become fairly expert in a gymnasium tank at home; but Donald, when he came first to Rincon Ranch, "swam," as his brother expressed it, "like a brick, and dived like a feather." He had gone boldly in, however, and mastered first the "dog stroke," with both hands beating convulsively in front of the breast and the legs kicking up water like a stern-wheeled steamboat. From this he had advanced to the "sailor

stroke," with the hands shooting out from the chin and each describing a semicircle. And of late he had devoted himself to the beauties of the "overhand stroke," which is one of the swiftest modes of getting through the water, and is the way in which the South Sea islanders swim. He was enthusiastic about it, as about everything which he undertook, and felt that if the day ever came when he would be able to lead Ralph thrice around the pool, life would have little else to give.

One noon he grew tired of the water, however, and, clambering out, lay down upon a small stretch of sand ten feet from the pool's edge, leaving his companions splashing and throwing water in each other's faces. On one side of this bit of sand lay the rotting trunk of a tree. Donald saw what appeared to be a long, active bit of sand leap up and fall on the log. When it came into contrast with the black wood, he knew it to be a chameleon some eight inches long. Its skin

rapidly darkened to match the log, and he rose for a nearer view; he was never tired of watching these little creatures change hue. The chameleon, seeing him approach, rapidly scuttled to the farther side of the trunk, threw itself upon the ground, and darted into the undergrowth. It went so fast as to be barely visible, and Don stood staring.

"My!" he muttered, "that fellow 's a record-breaker. It takes two people to watch him, one to say 'Here he comes!' and the other to say 'Yonder he goes!'"

So, staring, he marked a lengthy insect crawl from under the log and stretch itself upon the hot white sand where the sun's rays could beat upon it. It was brown in color, six inches long, a quarter of an inch through, and its back was hard and scaly. It had many legs, and its track on the sand looked as if a thousand pin-points had been pressed down. He called to the other boys:

"Here 's the biggest worm on earth,

Maybe it 's good to fish with. Wait! I 'll bring it to you."

"Hold on!" Harry shouted instantly. "Don't touch it!"

He scrambled out of the water and came running, followed by Ralph.

"Ha!" he said. "Your 'worm' would have made it busy for you. That 's a centipede!"

"Well?" Don said inquiringly. "What of it?"

"Poison," Harry answered; "big heap poison!"

He broke a six-foot branch from a willow and touched the centipede with it. The villainous creature dug its rear legs into the sand and raised all of the fore part of its body a half-inch clear of the ground. The boys saw that it had two short curved horns at the corners of a distinct mouth, and small shining needle-points of eyes. A drop of dark liquid showed, and it reached forward slowly for the stick. Next instant Harry raised the

switch and brought it down sharply thrice, cutting the centipede in two. The halves continued to writhe for a while, but the life went out of them finally.

"That fellow," said Harry, "is about the most dangerous thing we have around here, and if there were more of him nobody could live in this country. Providence makes them few. The Mexicans believe that the centipede's venom is the most deadly of all poisons, but I do not know that it is any worse than that of the rattlesnake. If a rattlesnake bites you, and you do not treat the hurt immediately, you will die surely, and that is true of the centipede's bite. Any strong stimulant, like spirits of ammonia, will generally enable one to get over the evil effects, though sometimes nothing appears to be of any good. Last year one of the ranch children, a little girl three years old, was bitten by a centipede, and its parents gave it nearly a quart of raw whisky without making it drunk. It died, but maybe the

whisky killed it; it would have died anyhow. If Mexican sheep-herders are bitten by a centipede or rattler they almost always die, because they have no stimulant and nothing to put upon the puncture except moistened tobacco, which is good, but not good enough."

"Is there — is there any way to dodge 'em?" asked Don, who had been white and silent for some time.

"No, there is n't. The rattler is chivalric and gives warning of attack, but the centipede is a thief in the night. Indeed, it does most of its damage after dark. You may be bitten when sitting by a camp-fire, or one may crawl into your blankets. Our men are always on the lookout for them. They kill cows, calves, horses, and sheep for us. All animals dread them. If one of them gets into a prairie-dog town the dogs will leave that part of the town and will never go back to it. One day, as I was standing by a dead deer in an open space, a coyote broke out of the brush

and rushed by within ten feet of me. He was so mad with fear that he did not mind me at all. As he went past a centipede fell off his hide, and I killed it. I suppose the brute had sat down on it, or got to nosing around some old log. I knew that was a dead coyote."

"How long," Donald asked tremblingly, "would a fellow live if bit by a centipede?"

"Without stimulants to offset the shock and heart paralysis, maybe three hours, in great agony; maybe not so long. The violence of the poison is greatly exaggerated in popular belief, though I believe that the venom varies in different individuals, just as the rattler's venom varies. A rattlesnake which has gone blind in August is much more poisonous than at other times; I suppose because it is fevered. Here is a centipede story which Mexicans tell often and believe devoutly; I do not swear to its truth, but, mind you, it may be true:

"Two of them were camping near the

Rio Grande, and as the night was hot, they had taken off all of their clothing except their shirts. One of them was aroused from a doze by a prickly burning sensation in his leg. He looked down sleepily, and saw a large centipede crawling slowly upward toward his knee. He knew that he had not been bitten, but was afraid to call out, or to spring up, or to strike at the poisoner with his hand or a stick. So he reached out softly and picked up his pistol, which was lying on the sand near him, cocked it, put the muzzle slowly within an inch of the crawling thing, and blew it into kingdom come. Simultaneously one of the mules staked near by snorted and reared up hard against the rope, but settled down and went on feeding. The Mexican examined it, and found that the bullet had grazed one of its legs just above the hoof. Next morning the mule was dead, with its leg swollen a foot through clear up to its body. The Mexican's leg was badly

powder-burned, and all of the flesh the centipede had crawled over, from ankle nearly to knee, sloughed off, but he got well."

"Well," said Ralph, stirring the dismembered insect with his foot, "I don't want to see any more of them."

"It is not likely that you will," Harry answered. "During all of the years I have lived here I have not seen a dozen. In fact, they are something of a curiosity even in the country where they exist, and many people have them preserved in bottles of alcohol to show to other people."

The boys were getting into their clothes when a harsh scream came from the trees near, followed by two flashes of blue, and a pair of jay-birds darted out. Ahead of them, bitterly pursued, was a little brown wren, a native of the Southwest which raises two or three broods a year, two in a brood. The jays were only a yard behind it, and one of them, darting forward with sudden increase of speed, struck the

wren on the back, knocking it nearly to the ground. It went on, however, and the jays perched on an oak limb and chattered loudly to each other. Harry regarded them with an unfriendly eye.

"Now," he said, "there is an instance of something that happens often. That little brush-wren is perfectly harmless; it is not big enough to hurt anything, even if it had the disposition. The chances are that those jays found its nest, despoiled it, and attacked the mother when she came and protested against the destruction of her eggs. They 'd have killed her if they could have caught her, and they are now congratulating themselves about their crime."

"Do jays eat eggs?" Ralph inquired.

"The jay," Harry answered, "is the meanest bird that flies. It will eat eggs. If it is not hungry it will roll them out of the nest to the ground. If it ever finds a youngling which has fallen and is too weak to fly, it will kill it. It is lazy and

will not build a nest unless it is unable to find another bird to dispossess. It will waste a week in looking for an old deserted nest of last year, rather than turn to and build. It is beautifully colored and can't sing, very strong and won't work, has a sharp bill, big head, and bull neck, and is afraid to fight anything more than half its size. You ought to see a mocking-bird whip a half-dozen of them. The jay is smart, but has no principle. It sets a high value on its own worthless life. If you go into the woods with a gun or a stick in your hand, every jay-bird for a half-mile will go into hiding.

"In general, brightly colored birds build deep nests so that the mother will not be conspicuous when sitting; the oriole carries this to an extreme, and builds a pouch which it hangs from a limb: but the jay-bird will use any old nest sooner than take the trouble to gather twigs and make one for itself. Sometimes the female lays upon a mere plat-

form of twigs, and a slight shock sends the eggs to the ground. Those birds," and he nodded at them, "are lazy, mischievous, thievish, and murderous. Whenever I see them about the house I drive them away, because they interfere with the other birds of which madre is fond."

"They are good to kill insects, are n't they?" asked Ralph, who felt that he ought to say something in defense of birds unable to talk back.

"They are good," Harry replied uncompromisingly, "for nothing, except to make a loud, disagreeable noise, kill, and steal."

The pair, in the meantime, had changed their harsh screaming to a less strenuous note, which sounded like nothing in the world so much as a wagon-wheel turning upon an ungreased rusty axle. It was not a bird-note at all, but a strong creak. Harry said that it was their manner of being sociable and saying that they felt well. Suddenly they became silent, with

their heads turned to one side and cocked upward anxiously, as if listening to something, and they drew closer together. Harry's demeanor changed, too. He had been carelessly pulling on his coat and glancing sourly at the jays. Now he straightened and began casting his eyes about among the trees, as if searching for something. Then he said "Aha!" under his breath, and pointed to the top of an oak some thirty yards distant.

Perched on the topmost bough of this tree, with its round head sunk into its shoulders and seemingly more than half asleep, was a small bird not more than two thirds as large as one of the jays, with slaty plumage mixed with white. It was faced toward the jays, but apparently was giving no attention to them. They, it was plain, were watching it. Now and then they hopped uneasily on their bough, as if afraid to stay and afraid to fly. All at once, determined that safety lay in flight, they sprang outward, going rapidly.

A half-second later they both screamed hoarsely, for their small foeman was after them like a flash. From its superior height it launched itself downward, its wings not more than half extended, and its bullet head drawn backward, with the bill slightly raised. It uttered no sound, but there was a distinct whir from its passage through the air. It gained rapidly on the fugitives, and ten yards farther on struck one of them violently at the juncture of the neck and back. This jay went at once to the ground, turning half over in its fall, struck the sand near the centipede, and was still. The other flitted into the underbrush, closely followed. Don was for going to the fallen jay to see where it was hit, but Harry said:

"Wait a minute. I reckon you 'll hear something from that other one."

A moment later the second jay appeared, flying heavily, and silent. It went to a low branch of mesquit on the far side of the opening, and perched there. On its

breast was a drop of blood. It swayed backward and forward, clung desperately with its claws, then let go its hold and came down, dead before it struck the ground.

The small slayer reappeared and lighted by the corpse on the sand, picked it up by one wing, and deposited it carefully in the fork of a tree. It went then to the second victim, raised it in the same manner, flew to a locust, and hung the body on one of its three-inch thorns, working busily for five minutes. Then it went away swiftly. From first to last it had not uttered a sound, doing its work in a workmanlike manner and as a matter of course. The boys looked from the suspended jays to Harry, and wondered.

"That," he said, "was a shrike. It comes in the fall, but does not nest here. Some folks call it the 'butcher-bird'; some of them around here call it the 'Spanish mocking-bird,' though why I don't know. For its size it is the fiercest

and most deadly bird we have. It meets its match in the bee-martin or king-bird, and it does not bother the mocking-bird, because anything that bothers the mocking-bird gets a fight right away, if it is as big as a sand-hill crane. I have often seen two mocking-birds chasing a hawk."

"Why did the shrike hang the jays up?" Don asked.

"For the same reason that a squirrel puts away nuts or an ant lays up corn," was the reply. "He put them there for food against the time when he shall be hungry. Of course they will decay rapidly, and I have never known a shrike to come back to any suspended bird. I reckon its memory is short and it forgets the places of its victims. It kills when it is hungry, and kills when it is not hungry to provide against a future appetite, and then forgets. Some people think that it hangs up the dead birds as warning to others. However that may be, it keeps itself pretty busy.

"I could forgive it," Harry added, "for killing all of the jay-birds in Texas; but the trouble with the shrike is that it kills any bird it is able to master — kills them, and hangs them up, and goes on. That fellow will probably not return to this part of the brush for a month."

CHAPTER IX

A FEATHERED DANDY AND IDLER

COATS, bandas, and boots off, their feet in comforting slippers, the boys sat in Harry's room. Donald, with a piece of rawhide eight inches wide and split into twelve strings, was endeavoring to learn the Mexican art of plaiting, with his cousin for a teacher. Ralph watched them, too tired and lazy to make even passing comment. The night was warm, the window swung open upon its hinges, and outside poured a flood of moonlight so brilliant that in its beams a man could have seen to read even small print. The boys had found that the Texas moon was of double the strength of their New York moon, and that in the Rio Grande latitude

the stars of moonless nights were of wonderful beauty and size. They were set in a sky of black, and were not all pricked out upon the same plane, but had vast depths between them, depths that stretched on and on to infinity. In the moonlight the trees threw dense inky shadows, and the sand gleamed almost as whitely as snow.

As they sat in the gleam of a kerosene lamp, listening now and then to the grinding of a late cicada or the hollow roaring made by the wings of the night-hawk in swooping down three hundred feet without pause, a low, clear, most musical whistle came from one of the yard trees. It was repeated, then followed by a simple strain, tender and sweet, containing only a few rounded notes, but given with great purity and precision. Then came a rippling burst, very high and shrill, then a low chuckle, and then a silence. Harry smiled.

"There goes a mocking-bird," he said.

"He 's clearing his pipes and trying to find out whether or not there is another one near to enter a song tournament with him."

The first whistle was repeated with more force, and then there was stillness for a little while. Apparently the singer was satisfied that no rival was within hearing, for he suddenly burst into a rhapsody of song. It was a rapid fire and cross-fire of notes that no musician could have followed. The voice was of a peculiarly liquid quality which seemed to bubble from the small throat without the will of its owner, and it was filled with unexpected turns, quavers, and broken octaves that came without any attempt at arrangement. It was all melodious and harmonious, but artless. Now the song was slow, low, and sweet, with a mournful cadence, then brighter and of quicker movement, then a storm of tinkling notes that rushed and crowded each other on the air, then dropping suddenly almost to

hoarseness, then clanging metallically and wildly on the night. There appeared to be no limit to its range, to its sweetness, or to its contrasts. It was unlike any bird-music the Crugers had ever heard. There were times when it might have been compared to the concert of thirty birds at once, all bursting their throats.

"That mocker," said Harry, "began his song on the lowest branch of the tree, and while singing is working his way upward. When he reaches the topmost branch he will sway and do his best for a while, then sing his way down again. He will keep this up until the moon goes down, whether it lasts all night or not."

As he ceased, the bird had perched upon the highest twig and was plainly visible in the moonlight. It stood upon the elastic little branch, swaying up and down for six inches or so, and intoxicated with its own music. Its beak was pointed upward, its wings half opened, its gray breast distended, its round black eyes

shining. So perched and inspired, the melody in it swung and caroled and tinkled on the night. At times it had a queer ventriloquic quality, and came from every point of the compass at once; then it narrowed to that single swaying point, and soared forth, crystal-like in purity, placid and serene.

Loosing its hold, the mocker descended into a dark tuft of branches below, and thence sent out its voice, rejoicing in its power. Trills, roulades, bravuras, crescendos, diminuendos, bits of unadorned airs, inexpressibly difficult renditions, were alike to it. It sang because its Creator had implanted in it a deathless desire to sing; it had no order nor intentional control, but it was master of melodic medley:

> And all his stanchless song,
> As something falling unaware,
> Fell out of the tall trees he sang among,
> Fell ringing down the ringing morn and rang—
> Rang like a golden jewel down a golden stair.

Then the bird, still crouched in the dark, and tired apparently of making music, began a series of imitations, wonderful alike in their clearness and correctness. It gave the scream of the jay, the caw of the crow, the thin, plaintive call of the plover flying overhead in the night, the sharp, harsh "'Scape! 'Scape!" of the jack-snipe, the quail's whistle, the quacking of wild ducks, the mews of the catbird —all of the hundred sounds it heard during its life in the open and unconsciously memorized. Any listener would have said that in the black massive oak, down whose edges flowed a torrent of moonbeams, was an entire aviary comprising every song-bird of the Southwest and many of those which live farther north.

The boys listened intently. Donald stopped plaiting, and Harry went to the window and seated himself on its broad ledge.

"I never get tired of them," he said. "They are at their best now. Late in

the summer, when the migrating birds have been absent for months, the mockers forget a good deal that they know and have to learn it all over again in the fall. The plover-whistling and duck-quacking you heard awhile ago will be gone from that fellow by June, and you will never hear them in his repertoire. Mocking-birds practise just as other vocalists do. Of course they sing a little at all times; but in the fall, with the first flight of birds from the North, you will find them industriously endeavoring to pick up the forgotten imitations. They are very patient and hard-working about it, trying again and again until they are satisfied with the imitation. That is the only kind of work the male mocker will do. You know, of course, that it is the male that sings. The female has no voice, or, if she has, does not use it."

"You seem to know a good deal about birds," said Ralph.

"They have been with me almost constantly for some years," the other an-

swered simply, "and I could not help noticing them. The male mocker has his good points. He is handsome, a brilliant minstrel, and very brave; but when that is said, all is said. There is not much to him except courage and music. The couples build about here every spring, but I was especially attracted by one of them two years ago. He attracted me because he was one of the finest singers I ever heard. They differ greatly in ability. This chap came with his wife one morning in March, and sat on a fence-post while the wife looked for a place in which to build. I knew that he had been around here before, because as soon as he saw me he began to imitate the assembly call of the quail. It used to be quite a trick of mine to call up bevies of quails in the fields or chaparral, and I knew that he had learned it from me, because it was a bad imitation; if he had learned it from the birds it would have been perfect.

"I paid special attention to this rascal,

for he seemed friendly, and I watched him closely for some days. He was perfectly frank in his selfishness. His wife came back after a while to tell him that she had found a good place for a nest in the fork of an oak that grows out there by the river. He went with her to look at it, signified his approval, then flew back to his fence-post and began singing. She brought the twigs and wove them into the nest. He never brought a twig. Sometimes, when he had nothing better to do, he superintended operations, and scolded viciously if they did not go to suit him; but work was beneath him. So far as I could see, he did nothing except sing and eat. When the nest was completed he celebrated it with a burst of song that lasted a couple of hours, rising and falling, flirting about, and evidently intensely satisfied with himself. Then the hen went to setting, and he roamed far and wide. Every hour or so he was back in her neighborhood, evidently to

see that she was doing her duty, but he did not offer to assist her in any way. He did not bring her a speck of food; he did not take her place in the nest when she was compelled to go for food or water.

"I will say for him that he drove away any bird that came near her, and nearly killed one rain-crow that lit within two feet of the nest; also he entertained her with any amount of music; but that was all.

"There were four young ones in the nest soon, and they had healthy appetites. The hen was weak from long confinement and lack of food, but she had to do all of the foraging. She was constantly going and coming. I have seen her on hot days perch on the edge of the nest with her bill open and her breast heaving, and almost fall from fatigue; but she kept the children going until they were able to look out for themselves. Meanwhile the husband and father sang. When he

found a fat grub or worm, he cocked his head to one side and looked toward the nest, then swallowed the dainty and struck up a tune. I came near to knocking him over more than once, but thought that he was only doing as his nature bade him to do, and as the wife seemed satisfied it was not my business.

"Before the young ones were able to fly she used to flutter around him occasionally and beseech him to go and take a look at them. Sometimes he would and sometimes he would n't. He was too fond of himself to take much interest in others. When the young got so that they could fly, they went away, and the mother with them. He stayed, and grew so tame that I could walk within a yard of him.

"He became expert in imitating the animals about the place. He would bleat like a sheep, and low like a cow, and whinny like a horse, and crow like a rooster, and cluck like a hen. He had a distinct sense of humor or mischief, too.

I have seen him on a limb of that oak out there, when the chickens were busy about the yard, give the scream of the hungry hawk to perfection, and every hen with her little yellow children would scamper under the house for protection. Then he would dance about in high glee. The old house-cat had a litter of kittens then, and they were kept in a box out by the kitchen. The bird did not like the cat, naturally, and it would whine like these kittens until old Juanita would come scurrying, with her whiskers bristling, from any part of the yard or house. She would have given a good deal to get hold of that mocker."

All of this amused Donald intensely. He sat with eyes intent, his brown hands resting on his knees, then drew a long breath and asked:

"What became of him?"

"Why," Harry answered, "I can't say, exactly. He went away in the fall, and did not come back. Doubtless he is dead.

Mockers are safe enough in pleasant weather, except from hawks, or owls after dark; but when the northers blow they do like most other birds, and get into the deepest chaparral, which acts as a windbreak. Now in the chaparral nothing is safe. The meanest insect and the strongest beast hold their lives only through luck and watchfulness. The lizards eat the insects; the birds eat the lizards; the snakes, wildcats, leopard-cats, foxes, coyotes and skunks eat the birds. It goes on that way clear up to the puma, and man kills him. I reckon some cat got my lazy singer. Pretty nearly all of them end that way. I have heard folks wonder why they so seldom saw dead birds out in the fields or brush; but I think that few of them die natural deaths. They are caught, sooner or later, and eaten."

Harry stood silent for a while, and then said softly:

"Once I had two mocking-birds in a cage; but I do not try to keep them now.

They love freedom too well. The cage hung on the outside of the house, where they could get plenty of air and sunshine. They were very young; in fact, I took them from the nest before they could fly. One day, when they had been shut up for nearly a week, I saw the mother bird fly to the cage, hold to its bars, and feed one of them. She had been around a good deal, fluttering, and I had not disturbed her, because I wanted her to see as much of them as possible. Well, within half an hour after she fed this one, it became stupid, sat with its eyes closed, then died. She came again, bearing some sort of berry in her beak; but I drove her away, took out the survivor, and replaced it in the nest. I know that she poisoned one of her offspring and would have killed them both if permitted to. I learned afterward that this happens often when the mother bird can get at those in the cage. She poisons them as soon as she finds that she cannot set them free."

"That," said Ralph, "goes to prove that the mocking-bird can reason."

"I myself think that it rises beyond mere instinct," Harry said. "The bird must argue to herself that her children are prisoners for life, and that they would be better dead than alive. It is certain that female mockers never poison their young when at liberty. I have seen a good deal to make me think that some animals are able to reason. I have known broken-winged ducks to drown themselves to prevent capture. Rattlesnakes will kill themselves in captivity, or when blind, if they are tortured. Bees have got lots of sense, and ants are smarter than some human beings. Why, I had a hound once that — but it is getting late."

Donald, who was keeping awake by holding his lids apart with thumb and forefinger, protested that it was early and no time for bed; but Ralph yawned and led him away. The boys found that ten hours of dreamless sleep was little enough down on the Rincon Ranch.

CHAPTER X

VISITING AN OUTLYING SHEEP-CAMP

"WE have a sheep-camp on the southern limit of our range," said Harry, one morning. "I must go there to-day to see how Estevan, the pastor, or shepherd, is getting on. Would you like to ride?"

Of course the Cruger boys would like to ride. They counted each hour in the saddle an hour gained. So they saw much of the surrounding country, and many of the many strange things it contained, and got health and strength. The horses were ready within five minutes; then Donald spent fifteen minutes in the "dark room," loading his camera; then he had lost one of his spurs, and searched until he found it; then Aunt Mary discovered a button off Ralph's woolen shirt, and that was

sewed; then one of the hounds was bent on following, and was chased, captured, and tied up; then they started.

The way led due south over an open country dotted with *mottes* of live-oaks. The ground was firm underfoot, the sky blue, the air soft and warm. They rode at a swinging lope to make up for lost time. Remembering the tricks of the Mexican cow-hands, Donald's desire to experiment besought him to throw his right leg over the pommel of the saddle, which he did, and promptly rolled off into a sand-heap. His pony was caught and brought back to him, sitting ruefully and brushing sand from his hair.

"I 'd do that again if I were you," said Ralph, severely.

"Thank ye," said Don. "It 's your turn to make fun for us. Let 's see you stand on your head."

Ralph was contemptuously silent. Six miles from the rancheria, Harry drew rein and pointed ahead and to the left.

"Yonder is the flock," he said.

Looking closely, the boys saw on the side of a hill two miles distant some little brown objects not so large as rabbits. They seemed to be motionless, and were strung out for some distance. The riders turned in that direction, and in a little while could make out the figure of the shepherd seated under a solitary mesquit and watching his sheep. He wore a battered straw hat, the brim missing from one side, and a heavy blanket was over his shoulders. His other garments were a stained cotton shirt, cotton trousers with holes at the knees, and on his bare feet were rawhide sandals with a string passing between the big toe and second toe. His long black hair hung over his eyes, and a straggling beard covered the lower part of his face. He rose slowly as they approached, and had a queer, startled expression.

This man brought his flock into the ranch twice a year for the shearing; the

remainder of the time he spent in loneliness on the prairie and in the chaparral. His wages were six dollars a month in Mexican money, a bushel of meal, a little salt pork, and a little coffee. Supplies were taken to him every thirty days, but were left generally at his camp, from which he was absent except at night. Thus it was that for months at a time he held converse with no human being. Occasionally he saw the vaqueros riding the range afar off; still more rarely one of them came close enough to hallo to him. Like all of his class, he grew in time to have a distaste for society, and even when at the ranch kept apart. He was not more than thirty years old, but exposure and brooding gave him the look of fifty. He had no weapons and depended upon his fire to keep the wolves from him. If they came near the flock at night, he seized a firebrand and went toward them in the dark. Some fifty goats were with the flock as a protection against wolves

and coyotes in the daytime. He was an expert trapper, and varied his rude fare with rabbits, quails, and wild turkeys, which latter he caught in a log pen almost as large as a small room.

"How d' ye, Estevan!" said Harry, dismounting.

Estevan said stiffly: "How d' ye!"

"How 's the range?"

"Muy bien." [Very well.]

"How 're the sheep?"

"Very well."

"Any *lombriz?*" (That is a peculiarly fatal intestinal disease.)

"No, señor."

"Scab?"

"No, señor."

"Wolves?"

"No, señor."

"Do you need anything?"

Estevan hesitated, glancing timidly at the boy. "A — a mouth-organ," he said finally.

"All right," Harry said cheerfully.

"You shall have it when your supplies are brought. Here 's your money."

He gave six silver dollars, bearing the liberty-cap, sunburst, and eagle, to the man, who smiled for the first time, wrapped them in a dirty rag, and knotted them securely into a corner of his blanket.

"Adios, Estevan," Harry said, turning away.

"Adios, señor."

They looked back as they rode away, and saw that he had resumed his listless pose, leaning against the trunk of the mesquit. Their visit, however, had done him good, and would furnish him with food for thought for a month. Harry said that the request for the mouth-organ was not unusual, and that the little instrument would go some way toward keeping him from becoming crazy, a fate that often overtook these solitary wanderers. They passed his camp on the return journey. This camp, on the bank of a little creek

dried into pools, consisted only of a tin bucket, a coffee-pot, a frying-pan, a blanket hung over a bush, and a heap of ashes, from which a thin blue smoke curled upward. Near by was a brush pen in which the sheep were corralled at night. The soil was arid and rocky.

As it was past the noon hour and there was a fire, Harry suggested that they stop, broil some bacon which was tied behind his saddle, and make coffee from a package he carried in his pocket. Each of the boys had a tin cup attached to a saddle-string. The bacon and coffee were soon ready, and they made themselves free in the only home of the lonely Estevan. Don made several snap shots of the other two, as, indeed, he had snapshotted the shepherd while talking to his young employer. Now he sat stirring a bit of peloncillo into the black coffee with his forefinger. He paused with the cup half-way to his mouth, and said wonderingly:

"Now what in the name of goodness is that?"

They looked in the direction to which his wet finger pointed. On the edge of the chaparral, mounted upon a flat rock, was a little animal not more than four inches high, which was squatted upon its haunches. Its small ears were erect, its sharp nose thrust forward, its beady eyes shining. Its long scaly tail was spread behind it, its stomach protruded in a comical way, and it held a twig in its fore paws. Its attitude seemed to say: "Who are you? What are you doing here? Are you honest?"

Harry burst into a laugh. "Hello, *compadre!*" he said. "At your old tricks, eh?"

The visitor paid no heed to him, but sat still; now and then the tip of its tail lifted slightly from the rock.

"Get up quietly," Harry said to the others, "and back out of sight. I'll show you something queer."

All three rose as cautiously as possible, but the little animal wheeled and was gone like a flash.

"No matter," Harry said; "it will return."

He drew a pistol-cartridge from his belt and placed it on a chip near the fire; then, followed by his companions, secreted himself in a clump of bushes twenty feet away. All was silent for a while. "What about it?" Ralph whispered.

"Why," Harry answered, "that was a kangaroo-rat, the first I have seen in a year. They do funny things."

At that moment the rat reappeared on the rock, and, seeing the coast clear, came forward slowly, still carrying the twig in its arms. It first inspected the tin cups, and turned one over with its nose. Then its eye was caught by the glisten of the cartridge, and it hopped forward rapidly. It did not hesitate an instant; evidently its mind was made up. It dropped the twig and took the cartridge in its paws,

then dropped the cartridge, picked up the twig and placed it on the chip exactly in the spot the cartridge had occupied, then grasped its prize once more and hurried into the bushes.

"That 's all," Harry remarked, rising; "it won't come back any more.

"The kangaroo-rat," he went on, pouring himself more coffee, "is the most honest thief in the world. It will steal anything it can lift, no matter whether the thing is of any use to it or not, but it will always leave some object in place of the article taken. Really it is a trader, not a thief, and it believes that the thing it leaves is just as valuable as the thing it takes. It does business while the other party is not present, but it means well.

"I had two about the house once,— they are harmless,— and the amount of one-sided barter they carried on was tremendous. They emptied a box of cartridges for me, and for every cartridge taken they left a grain of corn. They

stole my lead-pencils and gave me strings, stole a gold collar-button and left a baking-powder tin, stole my silver match-safe and left a black ribbon they had stolen from madre. With her they left one of the cook's shoes, and with the cook they left a rusty knife-blade they had found under the house. We could almost always find any missing article by going to the box in which I kept them. One thing was strange about them: if I took anything from their box and replaced it where it belonged, they never touched it afterward. I suppose they regarded my taking it as proof that I did not want to swap. They were with me three months, then sickened and died."

Harry led as they galloped homeward in the afternoon. Passing by a goat-path through an area of closely woven chaparral above which mesquit-trees grew, his horse suddenly half wheeled and plunged into the underbrush. Harry's firm seat was not shaken, but he lost his hat. Ahead

in the patch lay the body of a young horse, and the ponies which the boys rode manifested a strange terror of it. All horses are afraid of dead animals, but these were nearly incontrollable. After much plunging and endeavor to break away, they were quieted sufficiently to permit of dismounting, though after they were tied they stood with ears cocked forward and fore legs apart, breathing deeply, and plainly frightened.

The dead horse was stretched under a large limb of mesquit which spread over the path and some ten feet above it. There was a pool of blood on the ground, and the top of its head between the ears was crushed in as if it had been struck with a heavy club. A great wound was in its throat, and the skin upon its shoulders and back was badly scratched. Harry examined it closely, looked at the limb overhead, then inspected the far side of the tree-trunk. His face was white, and he seemed very serious. He said but

one word, pointing down at the horse: "Puma!"

He mounted immediately afterward, motioning to his cousins to do likewise, and led the way through the chaparral at a trot, keeping a close lookout. They went in single file, Ralph bringing up the rear, and when they struck the open prairie smiling in the sun, they breathed more easily.

"The puma marks were plain on the carcass," said Harry, as they ranged alongside, "but, to be more sure, I found the cuts from its claws on the other side of the tree. The killing was done two or three hours ago. That goat-path leads down to water, and this the puma knew. It climbed into the tree and stretched itself along the limb, waiting for prey. When the horse came by, it dropped upon the creature's neck and smashed its skull with its paw, producing instant death. You saw for yourselves that the horse did not move a yard be-

yond the limb. Then the puma drank a lot of blood and went away to sleep. It will return to the carcass to-night."

"Shall you try to kill it?" Ralph asked.

"I reckon not. I don't care to lie out in the dark on the chance of getting a shot, and the Mexicans would be afraid to do so. It will be gone in a day or two, anyhow. These brutes are great rangers and do not often stay in any locality more than a week. This one lives probably in the mountains on the other side of the river, and crossed over recently. Pumas will travel often more than a hundred miles in a week. They do not chase their prey, but lie in wait on a limb and drop on it as it passes under. They kill many deer in that way, generally choosing a tree by a path that runs down to a water-hole. Almost always they kill by striking one blow at the head."

"There are some queer animals in this country," said Ralph.

"There are," Harry answered, "and some dangerous ones. Don't ever ride

through the chaparral alone and unarmed. It looks peaceful enough, but death is in it. I do not believe that cougars, wild-cats, leopard-cats, or wolves ever attack human beings in this section, no matter how hungry they are; but there is no telling what a puma would do, should you happen to ride under a limb on which he was crouched. I should not like to try it myself. Indeed, I do not often ride under any tree without having a good look at it first. There is never any saying what is in the branches. If no four-footed animal attacks you, the chaparral has rattlers in plenty. If you are on foot and see a band of *javelinas*, or peccaries, or 'Mexican hogs,' let them alone. They can be dangerous at times."

"I 'll look out," Ralph said gravely, but Don's reception of the warning was characteristic. He was riding humped forward, with his eyes on the pommel of his saddle.

"I wonder," he said dreamily, "where I could get a kangaroo-rat."

CHAPTER XI

IN CAMP AS PECAN-HUNTERS

THEIR stay had advanced into December. The first norther rushed down on them, and a frost fell, leaving a brown tinge on the grasses. When this norther blew, the Mexicans wrapped themselves in all the blankets they could find, and their fat children hovered about the fires in the *jacals*, as they called their cabins. Even Harry put on his warmest clothing, and said that it was "mighty cold." The thermometer showed forty-seven degrees above zero, and the Crugers laughed. Here was one thing, at least, in which they were superior. It was moderate spring weather to them, and Donald emphasized the fact by walking about in his

shirt-sleeves, drawing in deep, luxurious breaths, and saying, "This is what we have in August up home," while his cousin looked on enviously.

The norther passed in twenty-four hours, as the earlier ones do, and again a slow breeze, warmed by a blazing sun, swayed the tops of the mesquits and whispered amid the branches of the cottonwoods and pecans.

The boys never tired of the luscious pecan-nuts, which grew thickly upon beautiful straight trees seventy-five feet high, and the manner of gathering them was especially attractive. A circular tarpaulin, fifty feet in diameter, with a four-foot hole in its center, was buttoned about the trunk and spread flat upon the ground. Armed with long poles, the four of them climbed the tree and hammered the branches, causing the nuts to fall in showers. Harry called this "thrashing." As pecan wood is exceedingly tough and elastic, being in this respect much like hick-

ory, there was little danger that any branch would break. The Crugers became climbers of reasonable skill; Harry was an expert, in spite of his weight; but not any one of them could be compared with Juan, who was more like a monkey in the foliage than a boy.

The pecan grove on Pendencia Creek was small, and one day Harry proposed that they go to the head-waters of Pena arroyo, fifteen miles southwest of their home, where the nuts were in plenty.

"We will take a wagon, provisions, blankets, and a tent," he said, "and camp out for a day, or two days, or until we get tired of it. We will take our rifles also, and Juan may go along to care for the horses. We will do our own cooking, and for a while will be monarchs of all we survey — though we won't be able to see far."

That was a proposition which appealed strongly to Ralph and Donald. They had seen a little of camp life, but not

much, and they felt that half a week of it would be wholly delightful. Within two hours the wagon had been brought out and packed, two stout horses had been hitched to it, Harry had taken the reins, the others had piled in anyhow, and they were on the way. After traveling five miles from the ranch-house they noticed that the country began to assume an even wilder appearance. The mesquits were larger, the cacti taller, and the chaparral more dense. Part of the route was over prairie, but most of it was a twisting, overgrown track which apparently had not been used for a year. Harry told them that they were gradually approaching the Rio Grande, and that the Pena, indeed, rose within a mile of that stream, flowing away from it.

They reached the creek about sunset, and followed its course for a mile or more, finally camping in the midst of a grove of pecan-trees, which covered nearly a half-mile square. The nuts lay already

thickly on the ground, and the branches were still laden. Like all the smaller streams they had encountered in the West, Pena arroyo was narrow, rapid, beautifully clear, and well stocked with perch and bass. They ate bacon and cold chicken that night, but early next morning had opportunity to try bass broiled on mesquit coals and perch rolled in corn meal and fried brown in a large iron pot half filled with boiling lard. Ralph declared for the perch, Harry preferred the bass, Donald and Juan went from one to the other with equal fervor. Don voiced their belief in the phrase: "They are both the best fish in the world."

That day they gathered three bushels of pecans, working in the trees only so long as it seemed good sport; then they returned to camp, shot at a mark, bathed and fished. At one place they were startled by a heavy splash and the sight of a large dark body shooting under the water at great speed. Harry said that it was

an otter, a most industrious and fatal fisherman, particularly to the smaller-finned things that stayed near to the bank.

In a pool they found the bodies of several perch whose heads had been neatly severed. Harry pronounced this the work of the otter, but Juan smiled as he shook his black head.

"Tor-r-tugas!" he announced.

"He means turtles," said the young ranchman, and then he asked for explanation.

Juan, after much questioning, explained that the turtle catches perch by burying itself in the mud of the bottom and projecting its long, slender red tongue, which the incautious fish believes is a worm, endeavors to seize, and is clamped by the iron jaws.

Late in the afternoon, as they were lying about the camp munching pecans, whose flavor Donald improved by the addition of semi-liquid peloncillo, Harry suddenly asked Ralph:

"Did you ever shoot a deer?"

"Why, no!" was the astonished reply. "Did you?"

"A number. Would you like to try one?"

Laughing at the absurdity of the question, Ralph admitted that he should very much.

"Well," was the matter-of-course reply, "you can in half an hour, if you care to. Get your rifle and come along."

Still incredulous, Ralph went into the tent, reappeared with the gun, and followed his cousin, who struck off at right angles to the stream. The chaparral was fairly open, and they made good progress, though the young leader seemed in no hurry. He treated the excursion much as if he were going into the home corral to mark a fat sheep for slaughter. Meanwhile Donald, highly amused by the expedition and his brother's trustfulness in what he esteemed to be one of Harry's "jokes," though he had never known him

to tell an untruth, lay flat on his back, kicked up his heels, laughed heartily, and munched pecans. Juan, stomach to the ground and his chin on his brown fingers, stared at him steadily with black eyes and said nothing. Harry explained to his companion, as they proceeded, that the killing of deer in the middle of the day was a difficult thing, because they were lying in the thickest undergrowth and were seldom in motion.

"Early in the morning and late in the afternoon, however," he said, "they are feeding in small glades, and it is easy to get one. You travel up-wind to prevent the scent carrying, make as little noise as possible, approach within a hundred yards, and then, if your hand is steady, you have venison. They are thick about here. You find your glade, and you find your deer."

After a walk of three quarters of a mile through mixed catclaw and mesquit, Harry, who was in front and unarmed, suddenly paused, stooped, and motioned his cousin

forward. Peering anxiously ahead, Ralph saw a large light spot showing between the trees.

"That is a glade," whispered Harry. "Go to it carefully, and keep your eyes open."

Bending almost double, clutching his gun spasmodically, holding his breath as long as possible, and with his blood hammering in his ears, Ralph crept forward. After going fifty yards, he stopped from sheer inability to proceed. A rest of a minute or two steadied him, however, and he went on, putting one foot before the other as softly as if he were walking on egg-shells. He avoided twigs with excessive care. Twenty yards farther on, parting the branches of a low-growing mimosa, and gazing through, he found that he could see one half of the glade. It was a little open place, not larger than thirty yards long by ten wide. Nearly in its center were grazing five large brown animals which the boy knew at once were

deer. They were a buck with a beautiful pair of horns for which Ralph's soul yearned, two smaller bucks, a doe and a yearling with small knobs of horn just showing. They were not more than fifty yards away, and were feeding quietly, utterly unconscious of his presence. The buck with the splendid horns was, of course, his mark. He raised his gun and endeavored to aim correctly, but was surprised to find the muzzle jumping about in a mad manner, now sighting at the sky, now pointing at the ground a little in front of him. Lowering the weapon, he was equally surprised to find that he was trembling violently in every limb, while drops of perspiration started from his forehead and streamed down his nose. He had "buck ague," a complaint of which he had never heard, but which was caused by his long crawl through the chaparral, his excitement, and the desperation with which he had held his breath. He was in a quandary. He waited a min-

ute, but got worse. The deer continued to feed as if there were no such thing as a New York City boy in the world. Ralph had wild thoughts of firing his gun into the air, anywhere, anyhow, and returning with the admission that he had missed, when he heard a subdued chuckle, and, glancing back, saw his cousin within two feet of him. So quietly had the boy approached that not a grass-blade had rustled.

"Got it, have you?" whispered Harry, grinning. "Never mind. Everybody gets it at first. Give me your hand."

He took Ralph's hot, wet hand into his own cool palm, and in a moment the trembling ceased and the young hunter's breathing became regular. They stood so for a second or two.

"Now," Harry murmured, "take the buck through the shoulders — not behind the shoulders, because if hit there he may run a half-mile — straight through the shoulders, and draw a fine bead. That Winchester throws up a little."

Resting the gun upon a fork of the mesquit and sighting carefully, Ralph let drive. Almost at the crack of the gun the buck, the doe, and the two smaller bucks crashed into the undergrowth on the far side of the glade, their white tails waving like banners as they disappeared; but the yearling, which had been standing a yard to the right of the largest animal, kicked convulsively on the sward for a moment, then was still. The boys dashed forward and stood over the deer, which had been struck through the head.

"Why," said Harry, in wonder, "that was a corking good shot, and this fellow is better venison,—but I thought you were shooting at the buck."

Within two seconds Ralph fought another fight with himself, and conquered.

"I—I was," he admitted shamefacedly. "I wanted the horns. I did n't know this deer was on earth."

Harry looked at him kindly and with an added respect in his eyes.

"That 's good," he said simply. "Not

every boy would own right up in that way, Ralph. You 'll shoot better next time."

It may be said here that before they left Rincon Ranch Ralph did shoot better several times.

Harry rapidly made two incisions in the animal's hind legs near the hoofs, and ran a stout stick through. Then, with his hunting-knife, he chopped a branch from a mesquit some six feet above the ground. Together they lifted the young deer and hung it to the stump of the branch by the stake through the tendons of its legs. Gralloching it was a work of five minutes. The carcass was wiped dry with large bunches of grass. Harry lifted it lightly down, brought the head back to the stake, and fastened it there with twine, making, virtually, a circle of the body. He swung this circle around his neck much as a lady wears her boa, and so trotted merrily back to camp, Ralph following him and explaining at every other step just how the

gun happened to joggle so widely at the moment the trigger was pulled, and how, when within shooting-distance of the next deer, he intended to take a long breath, close only his left eye, and become more rigid than a rock. When Donald saw them, he rose, stiffened himself from heels to head, and fell backward, giving his idea of a dead faint as he had seen it many times on the stage. Juan, instantly awake, busied himself taking off the skin. It was the unanimous verdict of the party that if there is anything in the world better than venison steak, it is venison ribs dashed with pepper and salt and roasted before a camp-fire.

CHAPTER XII

THE NOBLE SCIENCE OF WOODCRAFT

LEANING far back, with the slight remains of his breakfast before him, Donald tilted his tin coffee-cup until its rim rested upon the junction of his eyebrows. The coffee had vanished some time before, but he wanted the last few grains of wet sugar. Then he straightened up, looked at his companions, smiled widely, as was his custom when fed, and said: "Lots of pecans here. We 'll make a killing to-day."

"Right," answered Harry. "We ought to get five bushels at least."

Ralph said nothing. He was industriously rubbing the rifle, which already shone, and thinking of his future career

as a hunter. He had waked a dozen times in the night with thinking about the deer. Meantime Juan, who was like an Indian in that he would eat so long as anything was within reach, continued stowing away food. Harry walked over to him, picked him up, shook him slightly, —to "settle his breakfast," he said,— then carried him away from the wagon-cover on which the food was spread. Being set down, Juan said never a word, but blinked his black eyes slowly.

"Well," said Donald, rising and kicking first one leg and then the other, "I have n't eaten anything except a quail and some steak and some roasted rib and some bacon and four biscuit and a cup of coffee and two apples,—why did n't we think to bring some milk?—so I 'm light and ready to climb. Ralph, brace up! Where 's my thrashing-pole? Where 's my hat?"

He started up the creek, whistling shrilly. Juan rose instantly and fol-

lowed two paces to the rear. Harry and Ralph, as became their greater age and dignity, were more leisurely. Harry rolled up the tarpaulin and slung it over his shoulder. They picked up their thrashing-poles and went slowly on the track of the two younger boys, who were a hundred yards ahead. Looking behind him and noting this fact, the spirit of mischief which abides in all small boys prompted Donald to a proposal.

"You can climb better than either of them, Juan," he said, "and we both can thrash just as well. Let 's keep away from them and beat them gathering pecans."

"Fo' w'at?" asked Juan, who lacked the Anglo-Saxon instinct of contest for contest's sake.

"Why, just to beat them, of course."

The Mexican boy could see nothing in that, but he regarded Donald as a sort of superior being whose commands or suggestions were not to be questioned, so

he answered, "Hall ri'," and followed steadily.

To carry out the brilliant scheme which had come to him, Donald crossed the creek on a fallen log, and left the stream at his rear, pushing straight out into the grove. Having traveled a quarter of a mile in this way, he turned to the right and went a quarter of a mile farther. The pecan-trees were still thick about them. He halted by one of great girth, whose branches came almost to the ground, and intimated that he would take that one. Juan selected one more difficult to mount but equally fruitful, and the blows of the poles sounded through the woods. It was only when they had thrashed the trees completely and had descended that Donald remembered that they were without a tarpaulin. However, the ground was nearly bare, and they gathered the nuts rapidly, stowing them into large bags they had brought. These bags held near a bushel each, and,

though the two had lost many of the nuts, were nearly filled when they had gathered all they could find without extra trouble.

"We 'll have to go back to camp," said Donald, "and empty the sacks."

They were on the outer edge of the pecan grove, within twenty yards of the tangle of chaparral. As he spoke he saw a strange little animal come two feet from the underbrush, then waddle back. It had a long body, a sharp snout, and it was covered with horny ringed plates, like a coat of mail. Juan saw it at the same instant, and said simply: "Armadillo."

"Come on!" Donald said excitedly, throwing down his bag of nuts. "Let 's catch it! Ralph may kill deer, but he 's not the only pebble on the beach."

"He ees not," Juan acquiesced gravely, though he had not an idea of his friend's meaning.

Together they entered the chaparral. The animal, of course, was not in sight, but the soil was sandy and bare, and for

DONALD AND JUAN HUNT THE ARMADILLO IN THE CHAPARRAL.

a hundred yards the marks of its peculiar claw-like feet were plainly visible. The boys trotted hurriedly along this trail, vaulting over a low cactus here, going around a high one there, disentangling their clothing from the clinging catclaw, and expecting each moment to see the armadillo scramble away from them. Suddenly they came to a denser portion of the thicket, and the trail grew fainter. It was still discernible in places, however, and they wormed their way forward. They covered a half-mile in this way.

Donald, leading the way, was in a seventh heaven. This, indeed, was sport. All the tales of border warfare he had ever read, and their name was legion, came back to him. He remembered how "Old Shot-in-the-Eye," who never missed his Indian, used to pursue the unfortunate warriors through the forest. It was the habit of "Old Shot-in-the-Eye" to walk stealthily and peer around tree-

trunks, and listen intently to the flutter of birds and chatter of squirrels, which always betrayed the presence of the copper-colored foe. Donald imitated him as well as he knew how. He parted the tangle and glanced ahead of him. He laid his ear to the ground, and, arising, shook his head gravely. He brought his nose within two inches of the grass and glared intently. He stopped occasionally, crouched low, and waved his companion to halt. He said "Hist!" at frequent intervals. Sometimes, on sandy spots, he found the marks of claws. The tracks might have been made by the armadillo they had seen, or by leopard-cats, or by skunks. Donald did not know.

This was kept up for an hour, the indefatigable scout enjoying every moment of it. Juan viewed these antics with round eyes in which there was not a suggestion of a smile, or impatience, or wonder, or any emotion whatever. Anything

which Señor Don chose to do was "hall ri'." If it amused him to creep through the brush all day, inspecting the ground and saying "Hist!" it was well. They crossed rocky stretches and grassy stretches, sandy stretches and wet stretches.

Then, perspiration in his eyes and a crick in his back, Donald straightened up with the knowledge that not only had all trail-marks disappeared, but that he had not the slightest idea of where he was or how far it was to camp. It would never do, however, to confess this. He told himself that he would find the way back and, at the same time, avoid terrifying Juan. He climbed a little eminence that, pebble-clad, reared itself amid the under-growth, and looked about him. On every hand was a sea of mesquit and cacti. The line of pecans and cottonwoods along the arroyo was not visible. He came down and, with a fair imitation of jauntiness, plunged into the growth, walking rapidly. Juan, un-

questioning, trotted behind him. Another half-hour passed. Occasionally Donald stooped as if looking for a trail, but his heart was getting sick and his limbs were weary. Still he went on. Now and then he endeavored to chatter, but it was too much of an effort. He sank into silence. Thick gray clouds had covered the sky, and the position of the sun was hidden.

An hour went by, and he came to another small hill. He went to its summit and gazed about him. Still the same sea of mesquit met his view. Something familiar in the appearance of the mound attracted his attention, and he examined it closely. He found the marks of his own shoe heels. It was the little elevation he had climbed nearly two hours before. This seemed to him a strange and terrible thing. For a moment he was upon the verge of sobbing. He was not acquainted with the fixed tendency of all lost animals to travel in a circle. It was nearly the dinner-hour; his unfail-

ing appetite told him that much. He was both weak and hungry. It was time to take his brown companion into his confidence, so he descended the mound, and, with a slight tremor in his voice, he turned toward the Mexican boy and said frankly:

"Juan, we 're lost."

The Mexican boy, who in the vast wilderness seemed very small indeed, answered without emotion:

"'Ow los'?"

"We 're lost, *lost!* I can't find my way; don't know where we are. Why, I can't find the camp."

"Señor Don want fin' camp?"

"Yes, yes! Of course. I 'm hungry."

"Eat pear-apples."

This had not occurred to Donald, but he had no stomach for pear-apples, anyhow. What he wanted was Harry and Ralph and venison. He remembered that at noon they were to have had a saddle of the deer, baked in the ground. Harry had dug the hole the night before, heated

it red-hot, put the meat into the little grave, and covered it over with twigs and dirt. There was nothing better on earth, he had said. Tears rose to Donald's eyes. He felt that it was noon or later, and that by this time the saddle of venison was done to a turn.

Juan took no note of his patron's anxiety or the moisture on his lids. Being lost in the chaparral was not a matter of extreme gravity to him. It had happened to him before, and doubtless would happen again. It was all as the good God directed. He glanced up at the sky and could see no sun. He trotted to the top of the hill, stuck his forefinger into his mouth, and held it up to ascertain the direction of the wind. He came to the bottom and looked around him. There was a small open space at the base of the hill, and on the edge of the clear ground a large mesquit was growing. He went to this tree and examined it with care, noting it especially near to the ground. Then,

without a word of explanation, he started into the brush.

Donald followed and carefully kept within two feet of him, being dreadfully afraid that he would lose sight of him. After a hundred yards or so, he panted:

"Where you going, Juan?"

"Goin' camp, Señor Don," was the easy reply.

They went onward for a half-mile, then came to a space upon which no grass grew. It was deeply scored by the feet of wild animals. In its center was a reddish rock two feet across and ten inches high. Juan stooped to examine this rock, straightened up, and altered his course slightly, once more entering the chaparral.

For half an hour he went steadily. He stopped upon the edge of a small prairie and looked about him. Evidently it was unfamiliar to him, but he did not seem discouraged. Indeed, he was perfectly at home. His eyes had an intent expres-

sion, and occasionally he muttered in patois. He did not know one letter from another, but he was reading a book that had been his constant companion since infancy: Nature was spreading her pages for him. He cast about for a while in the grass, covering a space of an acre in his quest. Then he stopped and pointed to a small yellow flower, a late survival that in a damp and semi-sheltered place reared its little head.

"'Sta bueno [it is well]," he said, though what he meant Donald could not imagine.

Once more he set off, threading his way through a wilderness of mesquits, huisaches, mimosas, cacti, and underbrush. He went on a straight line. When forced to diverge slightly by some clump of giant cacti, he resumed it as soon as he had half-circled the obstruction. After twenty minutes of this work he paused, bent his black head to one side, and smiled. It was not often that Juan smiled, but when

his lips parted and his white teeth gleamed, his face assumed a singularly merry and childlike expression. An innocent boy-baby of three years would look so. Donald, listening too, heard a low murmur, steady and sweet.

"Agua [water]!" said Juan.

They pressed forward, for both were thirsty.

Indeed, the erstwhile fluent tongue of the American lad was cleaving to the furry roof of his mouth. First they left the brush behind them and emerged into a grove of pecans. Then ahead of him he saw two white objects — the bags of pecans, which lay as they had been left. The boys picked them up and half ran toward the water. A moment later both were down upon their stomachs with faces half buried in the cool stream. They drank and drank and drank. Then Donald rose, sighed heavily, and asked:

"Can't you smell that dinner?"

Juan smiled again and shook his head. Once more he resumed his submissive place in the rear. Once more Donald became chatty and masterful. They crossed the creek on the log they had found in early morning. The older boys were in camp, waiting for them and slightly anxious. Harry had not disturbed the saddle of venison, as the hour was only a little past noontime. He unearthed it while Donald was explaining, and a delicious scent was on the air. When he had administered a slight check to his hunger, Donald looked at his cousin gravely, and said:

"But how did Juan find his way back so easily? Did he know where we were?"

Harry shook his head negatively. It was not his custom to lecture. Indeed, he was at pains to avoid any display of superior knowledge, teaching his young relatives more by way of example. Now, however, he said:

"Juan found his way back because he is able to read signs. You would learn to do the same in a little while, and, as you are more intelligent, to do it better than he. Listen to what I am going to say, and if you get lost again, remember it."

Ralph coughed portentously, and said: "Hear! Hear!"

Donald, however, whose experience was fresh upon him, was gravely intent. He told his brother, with sternness, to "chase himself." Juan, not understanding, or caring nothing about it, continued busily eating. Harry went on:

"When you discover that you are lost, first stop and pull yourself together. Recall the direction in which you started from camp — whether you went north, south, east, or west. You can always do this if you try. The next step is to fix the points of the compass. When that is done, you will be able to go in the general direction you wish. Find a mature tree

that stands apart from its fellows. Even if it is only slightly separated it will do. The bark of this tree will be harder, drier, and lighter in color on the south side. On the north it will be darker, and often at the roots it will have a clump of mold or moss. On the south sides of all evergreen trees, gum, which oozes from wounds or knot-holes, will be hard and amber-colored; on the north this gum is softer, gets covered with dust, and is of a dirty gray. In fall or winter, trees which show a rough bark will have nests of insects in the crevices on their south sides. A tree which stands in the open will have its larger limbs and rougher bark on the south side. You have many evergreens in your part of the country, cone-bearing, or coniferous, trees — firs, spruce, cedars, hemlocks, pines. They ought to be good compasses. Hard-wood trees — the oak, the ash, elms, hickories, mesquits, and so forth — have moss and mold on the north. Leaves are smaller,

tougher, lighter in color, and with darker veins on the south; on the north they are longer, of darker green, and with lighter veins. Spiders build on the south sides. In the South air-plants attach themselves to the north sides. Cedars bend their tips to the south. Any sawed or cut stump will give you the compass points, because the concentric rings are thicker on the south side. The heart of the stump is thus nearer to the north side. All these things are the effects of sun. Stones are bare on the south side, and if they have moss at all, it will be on the north. At best, on the sunny side only a thin covering of harsh, half-dry moss will be found. On the south side of a hill the ground is more noisy underfoot. On the north side ferns, mosses, and late flowers grow. If you are on a marsh, small bushes will give you the lesson; their leaves and limbs show the same differences. Almost all wild flowers turn their faces to the south. There are many other

signs, but I reckon you will find these enough."

The boys had listened in silence. Donald said:

"That seems easy. I believe I 'll go out and get lost again just to show myself that I can't get lost."

Here, for the first and only time in his life, Juan displayed a flash of humor.

"Don' do eet, Señor Don," he said. "*Las palomitas* might bite you."

Palomitas are little doves the size of a man's thumb.

CHAPTER XIII

A TEARING RIDE THROUGH THE CHAPARRAL

RIDING along a narrow road which ran in an easterly direction from the ranch-house, the three boys were followed by the ranch pack of dogs. These animals were of mixed breeds, and belonged, for the most part, to the cow-boys. Sharp of nose, scraggy of form, with erect ears and half-savage eyes, many of them looked more like wolves than like tame members of the canine family. This likeness was helped by their color, which, in most instances, was an undecided brindle, shading off into dirty gray. Their noses were keen, however; they were stanch runners, as they had proved upon more than one

occasion; and when it came to close quarters with the giant lobo-wolf, the smaller prairie-wolf, a wild boar, a leopard-cat, or even with a wounded buck in his fourth year, they went in, regardless of hurt, and fought straight on to the end.

Harry had invited his cousins to witness a chase of the peccary, or wild hog of the Southwest. The time was near to the end of January. The boys had become thorough horsemen, and rather liked to show off their accomplishment. The prairie had lost its last hint of green, and was a gray-brown everywhere. From the pecans and other deciduous trees the leaves had fallen. The mesquits, however, were thick and shining as of old. There had been many northers, to the discomfort of the natives and the joy of the Crugers. On one terrible night in particular, not soon to be forgotten by the Mexicans, ice had formed a quarter of an inch thick. During this night the

dogs had whined pitifully, and in the morning the horses looked wilted.

As they rode along the young ranchman was explaining to them the appearance and peculiarities of the peccary.

"He is an Ishmaelite," the boy said. "His tusks are against everything, and every breathing thing is against him. He is obstinate, strong, violent, swift, enduring, and courageous. The Mexicans call this animal *javalina* (pronounced havaleener), from the resemblance between the sharp bristles of its neck and back and a javelin. The javalina runs in bands of from five to twenty-five, and subsists on herbs or roots, though it will eat flesh gladly when it can get it. It will not attack man unless in large numbers, and not then unless the blood of its kind has been shed. Then it becomes unrelenting. It has been known to stay twenty-four hours under a tree in which a man had taken refuge. There is an authenticated instance of a

band of peccaries destroying a man who fell from the mesquit into which he had climbed. A drove will always attack a dog if it can reach him, and if he is surrounded, he is killed and eaten. A single full-grown boar is a match for any two dogs to be found in this country. We have a pack of eight fighters, and if we have the luck to strike the trail of an old boar to-day, you will see a battle royal."

Three miles from the house Harry struck off into the mesquit, and bunching the dogs, sent them out ahead, where they scattered, running eagerly with noses to the ground, knowing that the business of the day had begun. They struck first the trail of a wildcat, which they treed after a run of five hundred yards. Harry told Donald to shoot the animal, adding that it was very destructive to birds and chickens. Donald shot it, but saw that its skin was worthless, and let it lie where it fell. Several deer were started, but to

these the pack paid no attention. Then, after nosing and opening on a peccary trail more than a day old, the dogs were called in, and, by the side of an arroyo, the boys had luncheon. So far the day had been productive of but one incident, and they felt disappointed. Their young host assured them, however, that they would have better luck in the afternoon. They were ten miles from home, and it was his purpose to try a wild part of the range, lying partly upon his mother's land and partly upon the ranch of their nearest neighbor, whom they had not seen since the spring round-up. The sun was still hot in the middle of the day, and after eating they rested until three o'clock, the dogs lying about with their red tongues lolling, and the horses hoppled and grazing peacefully. When the signal to mount was given, Ralph started to the arroyo to water his animal, but Harry stopped him.

"We are likely to have a hard run,"

he said, "and the sorrel will do better without water. Give him half he can drink afterward, but not before."

"That 's right, Ralph," said Donald, with a grin. "You remember when you ran in the fifty-yard race at school the trainer would n't let you have any water. You got beat all right, all right; but you ran dry."

Six months before Ralph would have resented this. Now he only laughed, and said: "I 'll show 'em something when I get back."

The dogs, some hundred yards in front, were traversing a country which was sparsely overgrown. Tails erect and heads down, they quartered to and fro, now and then an impatient whine coming from one of them.

"We are likely to jump something at any minute," said Harry, "and a last word before the fun begins: best hold the horses in a bit; you might overrun the dogs. If you bolt into a bed of cactus,

sit tight and let the horse buck out of it, which he will do right away. They are brush ponies, and they know that is the only way in which they can get out."

As he ceased speaking, the foremost dog, a huge yellow animal, gaunt, with powerful haunches and glistening fangs, threw his big head in air and uttered a short, savage yelp. The others, crowding in behind him, gave tongue also. Then they became silent and, with heads once more lowered, trotted forward swiftly.

"It is javalina, all right," said Harry, "but the trail is not warm. They will stretch themselves when the thing begins its run."

A half-mile was covered when the leader once more opened and broke into half speed, the others sticking by him and loudly clamoring.

"He 's jumped!" Harry called excitedly. "That 's the fresh trail. Come on!"

He loosened the reins and dashed away at a free gallop, clearing a four-foot cactus within twenty yards as lightly as a bird, and sweeping forward without check of any kind. Ralph swung to the right and Donald to the left of this obstruction, because their blood was not yet up, and pulled in behind their cousin. Then a great mesquit separated them; they ran into a piece of brush, cactus-grown, through which they worked only at a trot, and when they had passed it pressed their horses in order to recover lost ground. Looking around him, Ralph could not see Harry nor his brother. He could hear the beat of the hoofs, however, and knew that they were both parallel with him and on his right. From ahead came the yelping of the dogs, which were tearing along now, close to top speed, and making the waste resound. The boy was nearly swept from the saddle by an overhanging limb, and knew that the time had come for him to follow advice

and "sit tight," as well as to keep his eyes open.

Moreover, the hunter fever was burning in him. It seemed to him a better thing that he should let out a link or two and get nearer the dogs, incidentally heading his companions. So he spurred the sorrel, which immediately bounded a good ten feet, then settled down to more than half racing-speed. The boy ran so for a half-mile, burst through some smaller branches, and came out into an open space a hundred yards across. The tail of the last dog was disappearing into the green wall of growth on the other side. When half-way across Ralph saw his brother and cousin break out of the thicket behind him. Harry was calm and smiling, evidently enjoying himself to the uttermost, and he saluted Ralph's comfortable lead with a hearty "Good boy!"

Down Donald's face a thin stream of blood was trickling,—he had been

scratched by a mesquit-thorn,—but he was hallooing at the top of his shrill voice and sending the bay along in handsome style.

Just ahead of Ralph was a small indentation in the solid front of shrubbery, and without knowing or thinking what it might be, he dashed into it, the sorrel taking to it kindly. Before covering twenty yards he saw that he had struck a goat-path, two feet wide and reasonably straight. Branches of mesquit and huisache overhung it here and there, but it was clear underfoot. It widened in places almost to wagon-road width. He overhauled the dogs rapidly, and soon noted that they were near the path and running along it. He had nothing to fear now, only a watch to keep for tree-limbs, so he sat at ease, took a strong pull upon the sorrel, and settled into a steady gallop. Bending half-way to the pommel, and looking keenly between his horse's ears, he saw suddenly a rough brown object shoot across one of the widenings of the

path. The animal was over in an instant, yet not so quickly that Ralph could not see it distinctly. It was a boar of age and massive strength, standing nearly two feet high at the shoulder, its bristles erect upon its neck and back, yellowish tusks upcurving from its jaws, foam hanging to its lips. It crashed into the underbrush on the far side of the little opening. Instinctively Ralph dropped his pace to a trot. A moment afterward—there could not have been more than fifty yards between them and their quarry—the pack streamed across, a Babel of noises in their throats. Ralph generously called to his companions that the boar had turned, giving the view-halloo with all of his lungs, then half wheeled and followed. The chaparral grew thinner and the pace became terrific. Suddenly, emerging from under the low-hanging limbs of a mesquit, to avoid which the boy had thrown himself almost prone in the saddle, the sorrel plunged into a bed of

cactus which bristled to a height of three feet and extended some twenty yards. The rider had barely time to sit erect and clamp his knees when down went the horse's head, up came his back, and he bucked madly and blindly straight ahead. Ralph's first thought was that he could not possibly stay on, but he stayed on. Then he thought that his head would be inevitably jerked off; but he stiffened his spinal column, and, in some miraculous manner, his head remained on his shoulders. Then he knew that the pony was going much higher than the trees he could dimly see ahead of him. Then he wished complacently that Harry and Donald were there to see him ride. Then, with a huge, tall, last phenomenal bound, the sorrel was through, his legs filled with yellow needles, but his gallant little heart beating as gamely as ever and his stomach a foot nearer to the ground. So tremendous was the speed that Ralph was surprised when he saw a form flitting thirty

THE CHASE OF THE PECCARY.

yards to his left, and, looking closely between the tree intervals as they flashed past, saw that it was Harry, who lifted his hat and waved it cheerily. This was nothing to the sense of paralysis which stole over him when, glancing to the right, he made out another form which in a moment resolved itself into Donald. This young gentleman had no hat at all. His brown hair stood out from his head, and he was endeavoring frantically to yell, but his voice was all gone. Perched on the bay, with his knees drawn convulsively up, his jacket flapping, streaks of dried blood on his browned face, and his unoccupied hand wildly waving in air, he looked like an undersized maniac. There was no room in Ralph for envy, however. "Evidently," he thought, "I 'm not the only Cruger who has learned how to ride." So, in imitation of Harry's former salute, he turned in the saddle and called cheerily to his little brother, "Good boy!" Don did not hear him nor see him. His whole soul was in the chase.

Suddenly, with no lightening of the air ahead, they dashed out of the chaparral to an open plain nearly three quarters of a mile across. A dried arroyo-bed ran through its middle, and on its farther side was a range of low bare hills.

The quarry was in plain view, still fifty yards ahead of the pack, and going like a deer. The yelping of the dogs had changed to a wolfish snarling, coming from deep in their throats. Perhaps they had the memory of kindred to avenge. The big yellow leader, his black muzzle stretched far out and his tail like an iron bar, sailed straight on as mute as an Indian. The javalina dashed into the creek-bed, and was up again. The dogs followed him without losing a yard. The horses, rising into the air, cleared it at a bound. To Ralph and Donald came a sense of exultation as they were thus hoisted into space and for a moment could not hear the incessant roll of the hoofs under them.

On the far side of the stony little plain

the boar turned at bay. His innate ferocity would not permit him to go another foot. He had chosen his spot well. At his back the hill, scarped by floods, rose straight as a wall and twenty feet above his head. Its sides came a little way toward his front, for the wall had been, in a measure, tunneled by the rains, forming a shallow recess. Into this recess, not more than a yard deep, he had dashed and wheeled. He had just time to brace himself for the shock when the pack streamed upon him. The yellow dog was first, and leaped for the nose-hold. The javalina raised its snout slightly, its two tusks caught its foeman squarely in the stomach, there was a rapid shifting of the head from left to right, from right to left, and the dog fell six feet away, gashed in three places, useless and bleeding, cast aside like so much rubbish. He was dead almost before he touched earth. The others fell upon the boar, however, in mass. Not a yelp came from them, not a bark, not a growl. They only sank in

their fangs and endeavored to bear him to the ground. Such was his giant strength that thrice he rose under them, once standing upon his hind legs. Again he shook them off, and as they rushed in once more, the gleaming tusks played to and fro with the rapidity of lightning. For every movement there was a gash; but they were game, though mongrels, and they covered him as a blanket. Slowly the javalina yielded under the weight and the weakness caused by his wounds. One big brindled warrior worked its way behind him and grasped him by the haunch. Another worked its head below the gleaming scimitars of his jaws and clenched him by the throat. A hoarse screaming call came from him. Then he toppled over on his side, endeavored feebly to rise, and lay still, his small eyes defiant even in death.

Harry sprang from his horse, and the brothers followed him. The dogs were wild with rage, but a few strokes of the

whips quieted them. Not one of them was untouched. One of them, undersized but highly courageous, was badly ripped along the side. Harry placed it across his horse and tied it behind the saddle. It was taken to the ranch and nursed back to vigor.

When they had examined the dead boar, and marveled at his strength and courage, Harry said:

"If you have your hunting-knives I want you to help me. I am going to bury the yellow dog where he fell. He was too brave to be left to the coyotes."

So they dug his grave in the rocky soil, just at the entrance of the recess in which the great fight was fought. They piled a mound of rocks above it, and as they rode away Donald looked back at it with a mist in his eyes. He made a good deal of noise now and then, but there was a tender heart and a strong streak of sentiment in Don.

CHAPTER XIV

GOOD-BY TO THE RANCH OF THE "CIRCLE R"

WEEKS, in that almost perfect Southern clime, flew by on silver wings. Each day was marked by some new experience, some new thing learned, some step forward toward manliness and self-reliance and self-control, frankness and truth. Ralph, under the tutelage of Harry's constant example, had learned not only to stick in the saddle as if born there, to hurl the lariat with some sureness of ensnaring his target, to ride all day without appreciable fatigue at night, to estimate the profits to be expected from horses, cattle, sheep, and goats, but to know that a quick hand and ready

brain and fearlessness are things of steady value, and to have driven into him, so deeply that they were never uprooted, the old, old lessons that success comes only through repeated failure, and that he is thrice brave and thrice a conqueror who conquers self. He had good stuff in him, this boy, and the semi-rough life brought it out. He was thrown from the saddle and badly jarred, but he arose with tight-shut lips and not a murmur of complaint. He suffered thirst on long journeys through arid portions of the land, and found that querulous words did not bring him any the nearer to water. His hands and face were gashed by thorns; there were times when every bone in him ached from prolonged exertion; he suffered the pangs which come to every inexperienced person in a hard country: but he had never been so happy in his life.

Donald, shepherded by Juan, lived in the chaparral about the house. He

trapped blue quails, examined them tenderly, and let them go, for Harry had said that to imprison and then murder them was ungentlemanly. He came to know the sharply marked trail of the leopard-cat, the broader indentations made by the gray bobtail, the gashes of the rabbit's tooth on the younger shrubs, the destructive work of the peccaries, the curious circular depressions of rattlesnake coils in sandy spots; to watch the little shrikes, or "butcher-birds," slaying other birds and impaling the bodies on thorns; to note the differences between the calls of a dozen songsters and the imitations of them given by the mocking-bird; to tap and drink with relish the clear warm water in the veins of the maguey plant; and to do a hundred other things so foreign to his Northern life that he sometimes doubted he was the same boy.

Through it all the brothers continued to grow, mentally and physically. Red came into their tanned cheeks, their chests

stuck out, and they "trod like a buck in spring."

The change of the season was strange to them. Here was no snow to melt, no ice to grind and rend and crash its way out of the choked rivers, no late and treacherous winds of chill rushing from the east. They marked the coming of the hot months only by the increasing green of the prairies, the steadily mounting temperature, and the departure of some familiar birds for the North. The places of these were taken by other fliers which came up from the coast-lands of Mexico, and they were of a plumage to make the eyes ache. The boys knew, however, that all things must end, and so they were not surprised, one day, to hear their aunt say:

"Boys, I have heard from your mother, and she has been very lonely without you. She is asking for your return. It was generous of her to lend you to me, and she held her own pain as nothing when

weighed against your health. But now she wants her own again. You have been happy here?"

Harry looked grave.

"So happy, aunty," said Donald, impulsively clasping his hands, "that we can't begin to tell you how happy."

Ralph walked across the room, put both arms about her, and hugged her without speaking.

"You must see the sheep-shearing," Mrs. Downing went on, her fingers playing with Ralph's brown hair. "It begins to-day. And then I must bid you good-by."

Are the Crugers to be blamed that they felt this as a sort of reprieve? They loved their mother truly, and they loved their old home in the city; but they were only boys, after all, and for the first time in their young lives they had drunk deeply of the sweet waters of utter freedom.

The sheep-feature of the ranch life was something of which they had seen little.

Some of the animals were kept in a corral near the house, but solely for food purposes; nor had they encountered many of them in their excursions, because the sheep-ranges were distinct from the cattle-ranges, and lay along the Rio Grande.

That evening, near sunset, they saw a large body of objects coming over the hill to the eastward, and in a half-hour a drove of a thousand sheep had reached the ranch and been penned in corrals already prepared.

Rising at daylight, as was their custom, Ralph and Donald found that other flocks had come in during the night. Altogether not short of three thousand head were in the pens. These pens had been built close to the arroyo, and near by was a long, hastily constructed shed with a rough wooden floor, intended for the use of the shearers. The boys asked if the cow-hands were to do the work, and Harry laughed.

"A vaquero," he said, "a horseman

with red sash, spurs, chaparejos, six-shooter and silver-trimmed hat, would consider himself to be eternally disgraced if he touched a live sheep in the way of labor. His acquaintance with a sheep is confined to eating it, which he is not too proud to do. No, the vaqueros will not shear; they will not even watch the shearing. They have gone to their ranges."

Walking among the jacals, the boys found that every man was absent.

"'Ow, Señor Don," said Juan, in response to further questions, "yo' expec' mi padre soil ees 'ands wit' grease? Hit ees not so."

The family were seated at the dinner-table when a noise of a droning chant came to them. They went to the veranda, and saw a troop of some twenty Mexicans who were approaching the house.

They were swarthy, powerful fellows, with sleeves rolled to their elbows, and a mixture of blankets and cooking-utensils

strapped to their backs. They were singing, in a long-drawn nasal manner, a song to the effect that the work-time was at hand, the time of labor and prosperity, and after it would come the dance with black-eyed girls to the music of fiddles and guitars.

"These," said Harry, "are the shearers. They come from Mexico at this time of year, and go about the country in bands, taking contracts from the ranchmen."

Their leader, a tall, graceful fellow, stepped forward, bowed with an exaggeration of politeness, said "Buenos dias" to each in turn, and inquired where he might have the favor and the great pleasure to find the sheep.

Replying to him as "Señor Capitano," or Mr. Captain, Harry told him the sheep were corralled by the arroyo, and pointed the way. With another profound bow, *el capitano* turned to his men, gave some sort of order, and they marched off.

Donald followed them instantly, and was surprised by the rapidity with which they made camp. They tossed their blankets and cooking-things to the ground, threw some sticks together, started a fire, and in five minutes coffee was bubbling merrily in a dozen pots. Out of their blankets came bread, meat, and tin cups. In the center of each roll were three pairs of shining shears, ground to razor keenness. They invited him warmly to partake, and as the cold mutton looked savory, and the bread had been baked in frying-pans, and the coffee was jet-black, he sat himself down and began. Harry and Ralph, having finished their dinners in a civilized manner, found him earnestly gorging himself and listening gravely to the chatter around him, of which he comprehended one word in ten.

The rude meal ended, the captain looked at Harry, who nodded and indicated the nearest pen with a wave of the hand. A signal was given, and the slothful men

were changed at once into machines of feverish activity. They grasped their shears, bounded over the corral fence, and five seconds later were crowding into the shed, each bearing a struggling sheep in his arms. Each dumped his burden upon the floor without ceremony, knelt by it, and the sharp steel began to click. The animals were not tied. As they struck the flooring and felt a hand pressing upon their heads they became quiescent, only their heaving sides showing their terror. These were "graded" sheep; that is, they were a mixture of the native strains and merinos imported from Vermont. The wool upon each of them would average four pounds weight. It was astonishing to the Cruger boys to note the swiftness of the work. The fleeces came off in solid blankets. As they fell from the bodies they were rolled, tied with cord, and cast aside. The shorn sheep struggled to its feet and ran out at the other end of the shed, where it stood for a

while disconsolate, then began to crop the green grass on the creek-bank.

Many of them showed crimson marks where the eager steel had nipped them, but they did not seem to suffer at all. The twenty men accounted for two hundred sheep an hour, averaging ten apiece. There was much rivalry among them, and not a little chaff. A chorus of "Aya! Aya!" arose when a man, plunging into the pen, missed his hold. *El capitano* was especially remarkable for his speed and accuracy, and Harry said that he had been elected leader on that account.

They worked until sunset, maintaining the same high-pressure speed, and when they quit more than a thousand fleeces were piled high in the shed. They were furnished with fresh mutton for supper, and after they had eaten, every man of them rolled a corn-shuck cigarito, lit it, squatted about the small fire, and began to sing. Their voices made pleasant harmony. Then Antonio Garza, champion

story-teller of the band, gave them Mexican folklore tales until bedtime, Harry translating smoothly and rapidly for his cousins. Ralph had thoughts of writing these stories for the benefit of city companions, but found that he had forgotten them in the morning. However, he heard many others while the shearers were with them, and some of them he remembered. One in especial was dear to him. It was about a wonderfully speedy "paint-horse" of seven colors — black, white, bay, gray, sorrel, roan, and blue — which belonged to a handsome young chieftain who finally married a very beautiful young lady.

On the second day of the shearing, Harry invited his cousins to try their hands at the work. "Get off two fleeces," he said, "take them home with you, and have them woven. You can then say that you wear clothing made of wool shorn with your own shears."

That struck them as an excellent idea.

They leaped into the pen, and, after a wrestle, came out with a sheep each. In half an hour they had severed the fleeces and some bits of skin with them. It was fun. The small bundles were wrapped in paper and marked with their names. They found, on sending them to Massachusetts mills, that the wool was sufficient to provide them with two heavy suits of underclothes. Two other flocks came in from the river ranges, making more than five thousand head sheared in all. Three days were required for the work. Then *el capitano* and his infantry went away, seeking fresh flocks to conquer.

The boys assisted in "dipping" the shorn flocks. In an outhouse was a vat ten feet long, five feet wide, and six feet deep. It was filled with a strong decoction of tobacco-leaves and chemicals, steaming hot. An inclined chute led into it from a large pen. At its far end a platform sloped down, and this platform

led, in turn, to the open range. For half a day the sheep were forced by twos and threes into the chute, and so into the vat. Once in, they were obliged to swim through. They emerged badly frightened and a bilious yellow from backs to hoofs. This was to prevent "scab," and it was effectual. It was fun also, and Donald distinguished himself by falling in, ruining his clothing, but luckily keeping his eyes tightly shut. The worst feature of it was that for some time afterward he had to bear in silence Ralph's many references to the fact that Donald was now surely "germ-proof."

Early in April their visit came to an end. Mrs. Downing kissed them repeatedly and tearfully, and sent a hundred loving messages to her sister. Their faces were pale and grave. They had told their horses good-by the night before, and Donald had broken down completely. All of the cow-hands and Jocosa

and her maidens gathered to see them depart and ask in their liquid patois that the good God would bless them with a safe and speedy journey. At the last moment Juan broke from his mother's side, and, rushing up, begged with wonderful fluency that he might be taken along. Harry, with a smile, picked him up and tossed him into the wagon.

At noon next day they stood upon the little platform at Cotulla. They could see the locomotive smoke above the tender green of the mesquits, and in a little while the engine snorted to a standstill. It was a one-minute stop, and the brothers clambered on board. The three cousins shook hands convulsively through a window. Down Juan's cheeks tears were rolling. Donald reached out and threw an arm about his neck. For a moment the black and brown heads touched.

"Señor Don! Señor Don!" the little fellow sobbed.

The scream of the whistle wavered on

the soft air, there was a grind of wheels, and the youth and the child on the platform looked at each other sadly as the train moved away.